

Annual Council Reporting Framework for Welsh Social Services

Newsletter No. 3 September 2009

1. Introduction

Welcome to our third newsletter.

The work of introducing the Annual Council Reporting Framework (ACRF) to councils across Wales has progressed well. This edition will bring you up to date with the work of developing and delivering the Framework as well as presenting a précis of the learning we have gleaned from the workshops.

2. The Pioneer Authorities

Torfaen and Wrecsam agreed to be the first authorities to deliver within the new reporting framework. Both authorities worked with SCP Consult to prepare for the publication of their Reports and have been instrumental in contributing their learning to the publication of a toolkit for use by councils across Wales.

Both Torfaen and Wrecsam state that a clear plan and timeframe are essential in delivering a quality Report. The involvement of representatives from all the differing tiers of management along with operational staff, if successfully managed, will lead to a report that is owned and accepted by staff across adult, children and business support areas of the organisation. In addition, both LAs have incorporated the compiling of their reports into their performance management and business planning processes, so that the grids holding their evaluation, analysis and evidence become live working documents that are reviewed quarterly, as opposed to being abandoned for 11 months until it is time for the next report.

At the outset, the expectation was that both councils would present their first year's reports by early September. Both councils hugely surpassed that timescale, with Torfaen presenting to full council at the end of June and Wrecsam to their Executive in mid July.

Feedback from the councillors at both authorities was extremely positive, particularly around the accessibility and style of the report.

A key comment from Wreccsam councillors was that they wanted to have an account on the effectiveness of services which was targeted, accurate and accepted by all key stakeholders and they felt the report delivered on these expectations

From Torfaen councillors came the comment that they felt the links to business planning and service improvement, gave them a clear picture that would be understood by and discussed with their constituents. They were particularly keen to revisit the improvement priorities identified in the report at quarterly intervals throughout the coming 12 months.

Both councils are now working on their preparations for reporting in 2010, taking the lessons they have learnt from presenting the first report to improve and refine their performance management processes.

3. The workshop delivery programme.

The project team delivered a series of 8 one and a half day workshops around the country during Jun and July. Councils were grouped together in either 2s or 3s to take part in 3 half day sessions. Senior corporate and departmental managers, councillors and project officers attended from each council. The sessions comprised first of a presentation by either Wreccsam or Torfaen on their experience of preparing the annual report, followed secondly by work on compiling evidence and analysis to support statements on effectiveness of service delivery and thirdly, preparatory discussions by each council on their project plan. Having the experience from the pioneer councils proved invaluable and all participants were keen to learn from colleagues' experience, picking up on the 'top tips' and noting the experiences to avoid.

SSIA wish to record their thanks to all the officers in the Wreccsam and Torfaen project teams who gave their time and experience so effectively to each of the workshop sessions.

4. The ACRF Toolkit

The Toolkit is designed to assist local authorities in producing their Annual Report. It provides a set of methods and practical suggestions which councils can use. The first version was published on the SSIA website www.ssiacymru.org.uk/annualreporting at the beginning of June and it is anticipated that an updated second version will be available by the end of September. The Toolkit is based on the model of an Annual Report in four parts, all of which are crucial to a robust approach, process and product.

The four parts of the model, which both pioneer councils have followed are as follows and all together constitute the Director's Annual Report;

1. The Overview Report - i.e. the public-facing section (that is published in hard copy) and summarises the council's view of its current effectiveness and its priorities for improvement
2. An Analysis of Current Effectiveness - i.e. the section that contains the council's detailed self-assessment of their effectiveness and judgements about service and improvement priorities
3. The "vault" - i.e. the store of evidence that underpins the analysis and judgements contained in section 2 and hence the published Overview Report
4. Links to the council's Business Planning system which will deliver the improvement envisaged in the Overview Report.

It must be possible for any interested person to drill down through all these parts of the Report if they wish. In other words all must be publicly accessible (though maybe not "published"), and only taken all together do they constitute a defensible

5. Précis of 'Lessons Learnt' from the workshop programme

Below are listed key points from the workshops as raised by the pioneer and participating councils.

1. The Overview Report (see section 7.1 of the Toolkit)

- 1.1 Writing the Overview Report would appear to take longer than at first anticipated. It is a discipline to write it for a diverse readership, whilst also avoiding too much of the usual management speak.
- 1.2 This section is the most appropriate place to make any clear judgements around performance as well as highlighting key improvement priorities. It is also appropriate to refer to financial constraints that may be affecting your ability to maintain or develop services.
- 1.3 Avoid making statements that can not be supported by the Analysis of Current Effectiveness section. It is important that there is a clear line of supporting evidence that can be followed, right through from the Overview down to the links to business planning.
- 1.4 The experience of Torfaen showed that writing 3 Heads of Service Reports (children, adults and organisation) which sit between the Overview and the equivalent Analysis section, provided an excellent link between a strategic overview and the evidence supporting it. Such reports give the opportunity for greater narrative detail in service areas, but again be sure that they are supported by the evidence.
- 1.5 It is important to remember that the Director's Annual Report consists of the Overview, Analysis of Current Effectiveness, Evidence Store and Business Plans and as such may need to be made available for viewing outside of your department.
- 1.6 Public comments post publication of the Overview Report;- you might find it useful to set up a dedicated 'Director of Social Services' email address to capture and manage any responses/queries you receive.

1.7 Links to WPI - there is currently uncertainty around the revised approach and what will emerge from the new measure. However early discussions with key partners at the ACRF Programme Board have indicated that the Director's Annual Report should fulfil the social services chapter of the WPI particularly as councils will identify significant risks and planned mitigation in their Evidence Grids.

2. Project Management

In the first year, view your preparations for the Annual Report as a project needing its own management, but after that as becoming an integral part of your active performance management structure/processes.

2.2 It is advisable to appoint a project manager who can keep your agreed project plan on schedule and bring any significant blockages to the attention of the Director/Project Board. The amount of dedicated project management time will vary by council dependent on how well embedded and effective your existing performance management and business planning arrangements are. A sound process is essential if you want to deliver a quality product that has real value to you.

2.3 Both Torfaen and Wreccsam created a project management team, chaired by the Director, which met every 4 - 6 weeks to monitor progress against the project plan and agree and allocate all necessary tasks and ensure key stakeholders were included.

2.4 Be realistic about the actions and timescales needed when developing your project plan. Your project manager will need to review the timescales regularly against the need to complete tasks and also be aware of key milestones and what associated risks there are should timescales slip.

2.5 Links with CSSIW in regard to your draft report need to be agreed early on, so that both you and they can be clear of the expected timeline. They will be most interested in your evidence grids. Ideally key dates for meetings should be agreed between you before Christmas. Additionally clarify with your inspectors how and when you can expect feedback on your draft workings (pre publication comments).

If the timeline within your project plan is slipping to the extent that you may not be able to present a draft of the evidence grids as agreed, it is important that you keep your named inspector aware of the issue and agree a new date.

- 2.6 The Annual Report process contributes most to improvement/quality/performance if the evidence and analysis (the Evidence Grids) are revisited by teams at intervals through the year in line with performance management process. Actions can be monitored and updated with new issues added if necessary.
NB However, you must be mindful of version control on each updated grid as you will need to be able to justify the position with the appropriate evidence as it stood at the point of completing your report.

Make sure you allow time in your project plan to rethink/adjust/redraft your Report following comments/challenges/Scrutiny.

3. Analysis of Current Effectiveness - Evidence Grids

- 3.1 For at least the 1st year of reporting for the 22 councils, ADSSCymru has taken the decision to adopt a consistent construction of the evidence grid templates and the model will be issued shortly.
- 3.2 It is vital that you give serious consideration as to which people you have in the room to 'construct' your evidence grids. Time given to this decision early on, will save much time in the future as you may well end up repeating the exercise if you find you are not happy with the first drafts.
- 3.3 Identify 1 to 3 people (dependent upon your capacity) who can become really familiar with the RADAR methodology and provide a consistent presence, approach and friendly challenge with colleagues working on each template. This structure needs to be rigorously applied if people are to be pushed to think things right through to desired Outcomes, and you are to ensure that your conclusions are evidence-based and can be demonstrated as such.

- 3.4 Best use of the time you have with SCP might well be to use them to work with your identified group on completing the first 2 or 3 grids. This will benefit you in a number of ways in that it will - give confidence to the group to complete the task, - provide you with some external challenge - and help train your colleagues in the methodology so that they can work with others when needed (consistency in group facilitators is crucial).
- 3.5 The exchanges within teams working on Templates live on a shared screen, generated by the RADAR analysis (questions about core activity and how they are experienced and carried out within departments and teams) stimulate improvement thinking and activity in themselves and get people problem-solving together.
- 3.5 During grid completion, it is very useful to capture people's contributions as they come up. Make sure you write it down somewhere and worry about where it is positioned, if appropriate, later on.
- 3.6 A number of councils are considering having senior management teams populate the 'Approach' statements in the organisational grids and then working with colleagues to complete the grids, whilst planning to start from a blank grid with team managers on service areas.