

# **GOLDEN THREAD HEALTHCHECK**

## **REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**

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**SOLACE Enterprises**

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## INTRODUCTION

**The Golden Thread is the thread that links what you want to achieve as a council with the actions and targets you set at departmental and service levels. It goes down to individuals via appraisal objectives. It's based on the principle that you'll get better performance if:**

- Everyone is clear about what is required
- Everyone is clear about how well you are performing, both over time and in comparison with others
- Everyone knows exactly what they personally are responsible for.
- Everyone gets clear feedback on their progress.
- Change is thought through, and resourced.

**We looked at the Golden Thread in WDC to see if we could strengthen it and/or streamline it so it was as effective and straightforward as possible for staff and members.**

- We analysed in detail your council plan, department and service plans.
- We reviewed your performance reports to committee.
- We met with all department management teams and with the policy officers who manage the performance systems.

**This report shows that you have a number of strengths, particularly at whole council level, in your performance management. It also highlights where you need should consider making changes. Most of these relate to service and departmental planning.**

- Your council plan is strong and clear; minor improvements would make it stronger still
- Your reporting on council level plans is strong, but could be more user-friendly.
- Your service and departmental plans vary widely. They need to be simplified, and their content needs improved.
- Your choice of PIs needs reviewed so that you have a rounded picture of performance.
- Your reporting at department level is pretty comprehensive, balanced and in context. It could be more user-friendly.
- The culture of performance management seems to vary across the council – it needs to be **consistently** strong.

## WHAT WE FOUND AT COUNCIL LEVEL

**The council plan is easy to read, clear and concise and sets out numerical targets.**

- It reflects the community plan well
- Its objectives are specific and measurable.
- It sets out what you want to achieve under headings of priorities and objectives, and covers some background information on major projects and achievements.

**It would benefit from some development, particularly by including more on your big projects and on your top priorities.**

- The background sections mention some of your bigger projects, but not others, eg schools regeneration is mentioned very briefly, with no coverage of numbers or costs.
- Your main projects should be pinned down more – what exactly are you planning to achieve by when and at what cost?
- More generally, where is the money going and what are the big changes to that?
- Whilst you have 6 “priorities” – they are more or less all encompassing – what are your absolute top priorities for the period of the plan?
- Including who is responsible for what would increase accountability.

**Council level reports<sup>1</sup> on performance are comprehensive and balanced and include time trends and benchmarking info. They provide a sound basis for scrutiny. Including feedback on major projects and making them more user-friendly would improve them.**

- Whilst the focus on PIs is good, there may be too much on SPIs? What are the most important PIs for WDC?
- There is little feedback on your big projects – were they delivered to time and budget?
- There is little on your main achievements
- Progress reports could have a better overview of performance and data tables could be easier to digest.

**Public performance reports are balanced and solid, covering both projects and PIs.**

- Balanced here means both good performance and poorer performance points are covered.
- The reports are clear and easy to read and to digest.

**The Chief Executive considers performance with his Directors on a 1:1 basis, through appraisal and consideration of committee reports. CMT members feel that they work well together.**

- CMT currently look in depth at the performance and issues of individual departments on a one per quarter basis, but the format of this review may alter to increase effectiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> ie on the Council Plan, Community Plan, Single Outcome Agreement and Statutory Performance Indicators

## WHAT WE FOUND AT DEPARTMENT LEVEL

**Department and Service plans vary widely in quality and in content. Most say who is responsible for what, and include contextual information, but they could be more user-friendly.**

- The implications for services of changes on the horizon aren't set out.
- There are multiple lists of PIs and/or actions that make following the plan difficult
- Like the council plan, top priorities aren't set out.

**To be more effective as working documents and as a sound basis for scrutiny, plans need to be simplified and all brought up to best practice standard.**

- Plans didn't always include targets. Where they did, in most cases, but not all, the targets reflected commitments made in the council plan.
- Plans didn't always contain benchmarking information, making it hard to judge if targets were set at the right level.
- Plans mixed together PIs and projects/actions. Some contained more emphasis on one or the other. Both need to be appropriately covered – PIs for your core service delivery work and projects/actions for new developments.
- Some plans have started to set out resource requirements for changes or developments which is good. All plans should do this.
- Corporate commitments made in the council and community plans were not always included in the departmental plans, although they are now all present within the Covalent system introduced over the last year. Some council-wide measures<sup>2</sup> need to be found "homes" in departmental plans.

**Statutory performance indicators were comprehensively covered in plans, and supplemented by local indicators. However, the indicators used didn't constitute a rounded picture of performance, and may not be focused on the issues that are most important to WDC.**

- Outputs and outcomes were generally well covered in plans. However, inputs, efficiency, customer service/satisfaction, equalities and sustainability indicators were not routinely present.
- The separation of SPIs from local indicators and from actions to change things, also makes it difficult to assess in a rounded way how good progress is.
- The revision of the SPIs for 2009/10 gives an opportunity to reflect on the best indicators for WDC.

**Departmental reports generally cover all items in plans, and set them properly in context. Where things are not going to plan, corrective action and who is responsible for it is usually noted. The reports, particularly the mid-year ones are not always user-friendly and don't always cover main achievements.**

- Because all items are usually covered, the reports are balanced – they cover both good and less good performance points.
- Time trends are always given and in most cases, benchmarking data and targets are also there.
- Nearly 100% of PIs were reported back on, compared to 2/3 to ¾ of actions in most departments' plans.

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<sup>2</sup> eg citizens' panel ones, employee health and safety ones

- User-friendliness would be better if overviews were there and data tables were easier to digest.

## **MANAGEMENT AND POLICY STAFF VIEWS**

**Management teams had different approaches to performance management. The quarterly performance reviews had increased attention on performance in some services. Other areas had more well-established practices.**

- QPRs and associated committee reports are the trigger for some departmental and service management teams to consider performance
- Others use monthly or bi-monthly meetings.
- Some mention by both management teams and policy officers that performance management was seen by some as a burden, rather than part of the core job of a manager. These appeared to be cultural issues within some pockets of the council.
- Some movement to consider performance outwith routine agendas so that it can be more big-picture and less focussed on immediate issues.

**Appraisal appears well embedded in some areas, but not in others. Positive views were expressed about the new system.**

- Individuals at all levels need to be clear about what is expected of them, and they must get feedback on how they are doing.
- Appraisal is a critical part of effective performance management and should be fully embedded across the council as soon as possible.

**There were some common themes from managers and policy officers about what changes would help performance management:**

- Simplification of the standard template for plans
- Review of PIs – to get the ones that really mattered for their situation
- Linking improvement actions to PIs – to enforce an explicit consideration of what needed to be done differently to improve performance
- Better thinking through of the people and budget implications of changes.
- Increased visibility of performance information
- Increased focus on performance at all levels, backed up with training for managers

**Managers in all areas were positive about the growing attention that members were giving to scrutiny. There was a view that perhaps their reports and the covalent data could be better presented to make members' work in this area easier. Concerns were raised about occasional "politicisation" of scrutiny.**

- More user-friendly reports eg with overviews, were seen as a way of helping members to focus on the big picture.
- There was a view that it would be good to have members involved at earlier stages in planning at council and department levels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Corporate Level Planning and Reporting Recommendations

1. Include milestones for major projects, and their resource implications in plans
2. Identify your top priorities
3. Assign responsibility for PIs and projects to named individuals/posts
4. Include top level resource allocations
5. Review choice of PIs – in light of SOA and revised SPIs
6. Report back on major projects
7. Use better exception reporting for progress reports
8. Include your big achievements

### Department and Operational Planning Recommendations

9. Agree **simplified** plan format. And **stick to it**

Format should include, for each main area:

- PIs; projects; benchmarking position; time trends; targets and milestones.
- 2-3 big issues on the horizon and their implications for you
- main risks and how you'll handle them
- resource requirements – overall budget headings; changed budget items; implications for staff; for other resources (if applicable)

SOA, community plan and corporate plan commitments should all be explicitly covered.

10. Use same format for departmental and operational plans
11. Review choice of PIs to get a rounded set and the best ones for WDC
12. Try to get member input at early stage

### Department Reporting Recommendations

13. Review format of reports:
  - overview of progress
  - achievements
  - user-friendliness of cover paper and of tables
14. Cover both PIs AND projects

**Above all – keep it simple and keep it disciplined – 100% compliance.**