

Executive Summary: Self-Assessment of Performance, 2021 to 2022

Together with our four quarterly update reports for 2021 to 2022 that have functioned as our ongoing assessment throughout the year, this document makes up our Self-Assessment of Performance required under the new Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. It presents an accessible end-of-year summary of our performance against key functions, specifically our Well-Being Objectives (otherwise referred to as our Corporate Priorities), the seven governance areas, and the Public Sector Equality Duty (which includes the new Socio-Economic Duty).

To review the evidence behind the conclusions in this document, please refer to the Performance Update Reports, published on our [website](#).

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is available in Welsh

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Our Approach to Self-Assessment

It is worthwhile in this document that we briefly explain our approach to Self-Assessment, as this is the first year that one is legally required.

At the end of 2021 to 2022, the council trialled a new style of Annual Performance Report that would respond to the performance requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, broadening our existing approach to also reflect on the Corporate Health of the organisation. Based on advice from an independent auditor commissioned by the WLGA, this would satisfy the need to report on 'council functions'. Our report involved an analysis of the seven governance areas recommended by the Act's statutory guidance, as well as a more concerted effort to catalogue the activity of our principle meetings (Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny, and Governance and Audit), key news items, and reports by our internal audit and external regulators.

What we learned from last year's report (which was some one hundred pages long) is that we have a great body of evidence around how we are performing, but that it is difficult to make such a large document accessible. This document seeks to address that issue by providing only very high level summary statements that assess our performance, taking into account the wealth of quality information that has been comprehensively catalogued in our quarterly Performance Update reports (which utilised the same self-assessment template that we developed for our last Annual Performance Report). In this way we have achieved ongoing self-assessment throughout the year.

It is a requirement that the council, through its self-assessment process, identify improvement actions, and in subsequent self-assessments reports provide an update on our progress against them. We have achieved this through our quarterly Performance Update reports (supporting the principle of ongoing assessment), which have not only identified improvement actions during their production, but also captured improvement actions identified from the council's Service Performance Challenge programme, which ran during the summer of 2021. Service Performance Challenges are an opportunity for senior managers, Cabinet and Scrutiny members to be assured as to the performance of our services and the challenges that they are facing.

Finally, in addition to reviewing internal and external bodies of evidence to inform our self-assessment, there are new requirements around annually engaging with a comprehensive

list of stakeholders around the performance of our functions (objectives and governance). During 2021 the council updated its Resident's Survey (now referred to as our 'Stakeholder Survey') to ask specific questions now required under the Act. An analysis of the results is provided in our Performance Update reports, and the council will now look forward to running similar engagement exercises annually as part of its approach to Self-Assessment.

Equality and Diversity

The council continues to deliver a number of great initiatives in support of those with protected characteristics and living in socio-economic deprivation. In this year we have renewed our commitment to equality, published in our [Interim Strategic Equality Plan](#); Council pledged to being a diverse council, supporting accessibility and diversity in local democracy; through our quarterly performance update reports we have enhanced our reporting around equality and diversity activity; and improvements to our Well-being Impact Assessments and their publication will better inform and support the transparency of decision making. We acknowledge, however, that more needs to be done to support officers and members with the completion and scrutiny of impact assessments. There will also be further opportunity to capture benefits delivered in support of protected characteristics and the Socio-Economic Duty as we develop our new Corporate Plan in 2022 to 2023. Although our engagement work on the development of the new Corporate Plan themes has been comprehensive, we know that engagement with seldom heard groups or those with protected characteristics needs to improve, and we are working internally and with regional colleagues to develop solutions to this.

Performance Objectives – Corporate Plan 2017 to 2022

Housing

There have been significant achievements within our housing priority that have directly benefited residents and alleviated inequality. Many of our ambitious targets for the supply of housing are either making good progress (additional), or have in some cases been exceeded (affordable and empty). We have also done good work to improve standards in the private sector, and made improvements within our processes and policies for housing and homelessness support, including the Strategic Housing and Homeless Group, and the Housing and Homelessness Strategy. However, homelessness prevention remains a key

challenge for the council. Although we have successfully delivered a new Extra Care facility in Denbigh, more work is needed to progress the facility in Ruthin, which has faced significant delays. There also remain of course significant challenges with the availability, affordability and standard of housing within the county, and we acknowledge there is still a lot of work to do to address these.

Connected

A number of projects have made good progress within this priority, including our investment in libraries, which has supported those at a socio-economic disadvantage and at risk of digital exclusion (not least during the pandemic). Our investment in zero emission technology and demand responsive travel has also helped remove barriers to travel, benefitting those with the protected characteristics of age and disability. However, many of the challenges that we faced five years ago remain. Despite overall improvement in our performance against the national road condition indicators over the last five years, the ongoing investment required to maintain our large rural network is significant, and we know improvements are needed in terms of the timeliness of repairs. Internet connectivity too, though much improved over the last five years, remains below the UK average, and though we have used our position to influence and lobby, progress has been extremely slow despite our best efforts. Delivery of our plans for sustainable and active travel, and the replacement of Llannerch Bridge are also key challenges ahead for the council.

Resilient Communities

There has been some really important work carried out within our Resilient Communities priority, especially in the context of the pandemic, demonstrating particularly how well the council works in partnership to protect and support our residents and community initiatives. Highlights have included our work around mental health, becoming a Dementia Friendly Council, our support for carers, and assistance to community development projects more broadly. We have also made good progress with regards to raising awareness of domestic abuse; but like all these areas, acknowledge that there is always more to be done and increasing demand and challenges to be met. The council continues to protect and deliver vital and valued services for the most vulnerable in its communities, receiving positive feedback and accolades for its provision in a number of areas, including care and libraries. However, we face significant challenges with the cost of care, and the recruitment and

retention of care staff. We also acknowledge that we have more work to do to complete our involvement project for shaping and improving services.

Environment

The council has made excellent progress with its Environment projects over the last five years, not only through its extensive tree planting, varied biodiversity work, protection of green open spaces, flood prevention work, and raising awareness about the important assets that we have in the county; but also with its Climate and Ecological Change Strategy. However, becoming a Net Carbon Zero authority by 2030 remains a significant corporate risk, and as funding for a number of key projects ends, the council must look ahead to further opportunities to absorb and reduce carbon, particularly as it exhausts the 'quick-win' options. Greater stakeholder engagement and training will help. The council also has challenges ahead of it with the achievement of energy efficient council homes, embedding revised waste management arrangements, and delivering two further significant coastal defence schemes. It is also important that the council continues its work to ensure equal access to our countryside and historic assets, particularly for those at a socio-economic disadvantage, to benefit the health and well-being of residents and visitors alike.

Young People

The council has made good progress with its Young People projects over the last five years, particularly in support of well-being, skills and work placements. However, there remain significant challenges arising from the impact of Covid-19, impacting the development of young people and the delivery of some projects; but particularly timetabling and attendance in schools, which has made educational inequality more acute. There are challenges arising from the implementation of the new curriculum too, not least in terms of the monitoring of school standards, with pupil attainment, on the whole, remaining just below the Wales average. A combination of Covid-19 and market instability is also causing delays and rising costs within capital projects, which is a significant risk to our Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme (formerly the 21st Century Schools Programme).

Governance Functions – The Council’s Corporate Health

Corporate Planning

In addition to closing down programmes of work from its Corporate Plan 2017 to 2022, which has delivered many tangible benefits for residents, the council has undertaken considerable work to ensure that it meets upcoming legislative requirements. This has included the new Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021; the need to develop Well-being Objectives (every five years) under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; and the publication of our [Strategic Equality Plan 2021 to 2022](#) under the Equality Act (Wales) Regulations 2011. The council has tackled these key strategic strands of work well, whilst in the same year appointing a new Chief Executive; continuing to respond to the pandemic; and implementing arrangements for two European Union replacement funds and the Levelling-Up Fund. Key challenges ahead will include the Chief Executive’s review of the Senior Leadership Team; rolling out our New Ways of Working arrangements; inducting and training new councillors from May; and better understanding our relationship with the new North Wales Corporate Joint Committee. Improvement actions identified over the last year have on the whole progressed well, but we recognise that there is scope for us to learn from the pandemic in relation to transparent decision making. We also acknowledge that overall customer satisfaction with the council and its long-term plans is not where we would like it to be. It is proposed that the next Corporate Plan has a clear focus on how the council works, including customer service, engagement, and our performance. We have seen good engagement between members and officers over the last two years of the pandemic, and there has been particularly strong research and public engagement work carried out in support of potential themes for the next Corporate Plan, 2022 to 2027. There is a clear plan to further develop our Corporate Plan proposals with the new Council, seeking their final approval in early October.

Financial Planning

The council’s financial planning arrangements have proven robust and the council is well placed to maintain its financial sustainability over the medium term. The council holds a stable reserve and has strong monitoring and planning mechanisms in place to actively manage pressures, such as the Medium Term Financial Plan, Treasury Management and Capital strategies, and a new Budget Setting process that moves towards a 3 to 5-year

process. There are of course some significant budget variations, but we work to resolve those, and we have a good record of delivering savings. We have also introduced revised policies and procedures for countering fraud and corruption. The delays with the draft Statement of Accounts remains a challenge due to the timescales effecting other areas of work for the Finance Team, and therefore impacting service delivery going forward. The most significant risk and issue facing councils and the wider public sector in most recent times has been the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as rising costs globally. It is welcome that the Covid-19 Financial Recovery Strategy has provided a robust plan for the council's response. Another area of work will be looking ahead to the transition of revenues and benefits services to the council.

Performance Management

The council has effective performance management arrangements in place that help it monitor, report and scrutinise performance in key areas, as well as identify areas for improvement. These arrangements have recently been strengthened by the council's approach to self-assessment through enhanced quarterly performance reports, and annual stakeholder engagement. There are minor improvements that can now be taken forward with regards to Verto, our performance management system, which were not possible prior to the recent retender of the software. The new Corporate Plan from October will also bring with it the opportunity to enhance the performance framework that the council reports on corporately. The timing of Service Performance Challenges needs to be considered in the coming months as the position with the review of the Senior Leadership Team becomes clearer. It is important that these go ahead to comply with our Performance Management Framework, but also to meet recent recommendations from Audit Wales on the publication of performance information on non-priority areas. The council must look ahead to training opportunities for councillors after the election, as well as for new or interested staff. The council has identified actions that it is taking forward to improve Project Management and Contract Management, and is working with Care Inspectorate Wales on identified actions to improve the delivery of some aspects within Children's Social Services.

Risk Management

Internal Audit previously highlighted some areas of weakness in the management of risks, which the council has sought to address during 2021 to 2022 to ensure governance and controls are robust. For example, we have been clearer about how risk appetite methodology is applied and we have clarified controls that should have a direct impact on risk management, setting out the expected direction of travel for each of our corporate risks. We have identified internal and external assurance to ensure risks are appropriately managed and scrutinised. Our Corporate Executive Team has started interrogating risks that sit beyond our risk appetite in risk focus sessions with risk owners. Broadly, we have found that engagement with our risk management process has been good by both officers and members. However, as global events have grown in significance for our council and our community over the last two years, so too have the number of active risks on our corporate risk register. Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, and more recently the conflict in Ukraine, have had consequences for the global (and local) economy and our communities. For this reason, a summary of our corporate risk register has been developed to improve internal communications. A full update report will be presented to Performance Scrutiny's [meeting in June](#) 2022.

Workforce Planning

Workforce planning has grown in significance as the consequences of Covid-19 have heightened challenges in relation to recruitment and retention across the council. We have proactively put measures in place to address these issues. We have also improved the data that we hold about our own workforce for equality purposes, and taken steps to address the back-log caused by Covid-19 of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. We have implemented a stronger approach to workforce planning and participated in an Audit Wales study, which is expected to highlight some further areas to strengthen. There have been a number of recent changes in senior leadership, and this will be a particular priority for the coming year. During the year, we have supported managers and staff with the new ways of working, particularly home working, which has become our predominant working style since the start of Covid-19. We have engaged with staff using a questionnaire to determine managers' training and development requirements. The feedback from the survey has informed our new training strategy, and an induction programme, policies and guidance have been developed. Dedicated training sessions for

employees and managers will be rolled out from July. At the same time, we have focused on mental health and well-being and agreed a new mental health policy that has resulted in awareness sessions, training and online support. The focus for the year ahead will be to work with our Staff Council to support us in recruiting Mental Health Champions.

Supporting the New Ways of Working Project and supporting managers and staff as we begin to return to the office will also present challenges and opportunities.

Assets

The council faces significant challenges with regards to its assets. We have a perennially deteriorating and very large network of roads and bridges; a large portfolio of buildings to align with our Net Carbon Zero ambition; and growing pressures on our ICT infrastructure. However, we have made improvements. We have adopted minimum standards for in-use and embodied carbon that all council non-domestic construction projects must adhere to, and we are looking ahead to adopting a new Asset Management Strategy this summer.

We have made significant investments in our roads and bridges, including a £3m commitment to improve roads during 2021 to 2022. We have introduced new frameworks in support of our maintenance of schools, non-schools and housing. We have good health and safety and fire safety procedures in place. In partnership with Dŵr Cymru and Natural Resources Wales, we have also taken forward improvement actions to alleviate flooding. The council also has increased investment to ensure the safe management of its data, and better support for home working. Looking ahead, an immediate challenge will be preparing our offices for New Ways of Working, accommodating increased staff numbers, hybrid meetings, and different workstyles.

Procurement

The Procurement Team has made some improvements this year to the advice and support available to services to encourage good procurement practice and adherence of the procurement policy across the organisation. However, progress across a range of actions to improve and decarbonise procurement have been hampered due to continuing challenges in recruiting to the Procurement Manager post. This has resulted in existing team members taking on more responsibility on top of existing portfolios. We lack specific expertise in relation to ecology and decarbonisation, but we hope to secure the budget for a new post during 2022 to 2023. We have seen some positive progress in relation to

collaborative procurements, and we are getting better at working with services to identify opportunities where collaborative procurement may be possible. These remain challenging and sometimes partners' timescales are inconsistent with our own, leading to missed opportunities beyond our control. The Community Benefits Hub is making connections between businesses and community initiatives, and has seen positive outcomes for individuals securing full-time employment as a result of their work placements. Securing a sustainable future for the Hub remains a key challenge. The development and adoption of a new Procurement Strategy by the end of the summer is also an important area of work for us to get right.