

Springing Forward – Gwynedd Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 As the world moves forward, learning from the global pandemic, this review has looked at how the Council is strengthening its ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services, including those delivered in partnership with key stakeholders and communities.
- 2 We reviewed the Council's arrangements for managing its assets and workforce:
 - a. for assets, our primary focus was on office accommodation and buildings from which the Council delivers services to its residents; and
 - b. for workforce, our focus has been on the challenges highlighted during the pandemic that have exacerbated some long-standing workforce issues.We looked at how the Council strategically plans to use its assets and workforce, how it monitors their use and how it reviews and evaluates the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 3 When we began our audit work under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 we recognised that it would take time for public bodies to embed the sustainable development principle, but we also set out our expectation that over the medium term we would expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate how the Act is shaping what they do. It is now approaching seven years since the Well-being of Future Generations Act was passed and we are now into the second reporting period for the Act. Therefore, we would now expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate that the Act is integral to their thinking and genuinely shaping what they do.
- 4 This project had three main aims:
 - to gain assurance that the Council is putting in place arrangements to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services;
 - to explain the actions that the Council is taking both individually and in partnership to strengthen its arrangements as well as further embed the sustainable development principle; and
 - to inspire the Council and other organisations to further strengthen their arrangements through capturing and sharing notable practice examples and learning and making appropriate recommendations.
- 5 This is important because Gwynedd Council invests considerable sums in its building assets and workforce. Some key information from 2020-21 is show in **Exhibit 1**.

Exhibit 1: key facts and figures relating to building assets and workforce.

Number of Council buildings owned in 2020-21	965 buildings
Value of property, as at 31 March 2021	Approximately £311 million
Number of staff	5,849
Spending on workforce	£149 million which equates to 39% of Gross Expenditure chargeable to the General Fund
Percentage of the workforce, of staff who were male	28.2%
Percentage of the workforce, of staff who were female	71.8%
Percentage of staff who work full time	52.5%
Percentage of staff who work part time	47.5%
Percentage of staff aged over 55 years	24.2%
Number of staff who left the Council by their own choice in 2020-21	400

- 6 The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on demand for buildings and the way that staff work. This report examines some of these impacts and the way that the Council benefits from the positives and mitigates risks from the negatives when planning future service delivery.
- 7 We undertook the review during the period December 2021 to February 2022.

What we found

- 8 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the Council's strategic approach strengthening its ability to transform? In doing this work we have identified some of the direct impact of the pandemic as well as some operational and governance issues exacerbated by the pandemic.
- 9 Overall, we found that the Council is actively working on its Future Working Arrangements project and developing the vision and plans across all services but looking further ahead will strengthen the Council's consideration of the sustainable development principle.
- 10 We reached this conclusion because:
- the Council continues to implement its Future Working Arrangements project but has not yet developed a corporate vision for its assets or the associated delivery plans that shape the future of its land and building assets;
 - the Council has proactive examples of management and repurposing of assets although there are opportunities be more consistent across the services within a corporate vision;
 - defining and reviewing progress towards short, medium and longer-term objectives for its asset base will strengthen the Council's ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of its services;
 - the Council has developed a vision for its workforce although this is not complete;
 - the Council has engaged with staff and managers as part of its Future Working Arrangements project, and needs to develop longer-term workforce plans, reflecting its pandemic experience, to support service delivery in a more proactive way; and
 - the Council maintains an overview of current workforce issues but there is an opportunity to make more use of data and use benchmarking to measure the current and longer-term success of its workforce initiatives.

Recommendations

Exhibit 2: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
Vision, strategies, delivery plans and the sustainable development principle	
R1	The Council needs to put the sustainable development principle at the heart of its considerations, building on the experience of the pandemic, as it: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• develops the Council’s vision for the shape and size of its land and building assets and workforce in the short, medium, and long term;• develops asset and workforce strategies; and• develops costed delivery plans.
Data and Benchmarking	
R2	Develop the use of data and benchmarking to inform planning, budget setting and measure the longer-term success of its asset and workforce initiatives.

Detailed report

Assets

The Council continues to implement its Future Working Arrangements project but has not yet developed a corporate vision for its assets or the associated delivery plans that shape the future of its land and building assets

11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council's 'Working to the Future' project demonstrates a commitment to a new model of working which will change the way offices are utilised. The Council is of a view that there is uncertainty about what the future workplace needs will be and more time is needed to reflect.
- a project manager has been appointed to lead the review of future office space and buildings' needs, and the Council has identified the need to review the current desk-based telephone system with a view to implement more flexible computer-based phones for most users by the end of 2022.
- the Corporate Management Team favour a reduction in desk numbers and adopting hot desking arrangements. Hybrid working spaces are being trialled within some sections to demonstrate to staff how hybrid workspaces can look in the future. A longer-term aim will be to transition fully to such hybrid workspaces.
- the 'Working to the Future' project has not set out a stated vision or developed the accompanying delivery plans. However, the project does say the Council's aspirations are to be a modern council, providing opportunity for staff to work flexibly, working wherever is most suitable to maximise the use of technology and work efficiently.
- whilst new hybrid arrangements are currently being trialled in some departments, the corporate vision and plans describing the future use of office space have not been formalised and approved. Councils need to be mindful of the fact that incremental change, without an approved vision, could take them in the wrong direction. In addition, the Council needs to ensure it maximises learning from the trial and uses this learning to inform the longer-term direction.
- the Council is consulting with residents in each of the authority's 13 wellbeing areas to inform the wellbeing assessment and generate local regeneration plans. Regeneration plans will reflect the needs of individual communities and provide direction. The Council is clear the local assessments have the potential to inform a transformational long-term asset management approach.
- there are further opportunities where the Council can ensure that key strategies and plans are aligned and integrated, for example:

- the 2022-23 revision of the Gwynedd Council Plan does not identify the commitment to modernise the ways of working nor recognise the ‘Working to the Future’ project.
- the current 2019-2029 Asset Plan is a prioritised list of capital projects by each department for the ten-year period. It is not driven towards a certain vision nor desired end state for the Council’s asset base.
- services have not identified their current and longer-term asset needs, and the financial cost is not known.
- strategies such as the Climate and Nature Emergency Plan 2022-23 – 2029-30 and Principles of an Education System which are Fit for Purpose need to be developed and costed to support the corporate asset vision and plan.
- at the start of the pandemic, some of the Council’s infrastructure, such as the continued use of desktop computers, was very traditional and was incompatible with their aspiration to be a modern council.
- the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies to have a good understanding of future needs. The Council needs to put the sustainable development principle at the heart of its corporate asset vision and supporting plans to help it deliver its workforce and service delivery aspirations, both now and in the future. This should help ensure its assets deliver maximum impact, across a range of its objectives.

The Council has proactive examples of management and repurposing of assets although there are opportunities to be more consistent across the services within a corporate vision

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the use of technology has moved some services away from a traditional office environment which will lead to a reduction in demand for office space at historical administrative centres.
- the pandemic has helped move some agendas forward at a greater pace than originally planned. These include home working, virtual meetings, and a reduction in travel. Whilst the Council wanted to change its way of working, it had not identified the need to replace key elements of infrastructure.
- the pandemic has provided some opportunities for the Council to offer its assets to other public bodies, such as providing leisure centres for booster vaccine rollouts.
- the Council actively seeks opportunities to repurpose decommissioned sites to provide new uses such as accommodation for the homeless and new housing development.

- the Housing and Property Department has developed preventative measures within the homeless services and specialist support accommodation. The specialist accommodation aims to provide more than the housing need by addressing the root causes of problems faced by vulnerable individuals. It aims to deliver real benefits, with the added value of reducing demand on public services.
- whilst the above is a good example of the Council delivering integrated preventative projects, examples do not appear to be as forthcoming across all Council services. This is symptomatic of the five ways of working not being embedded in everything the Council does.

Defining and reviewing progress towards short, medium and longer-term objectives for its asset base will strengthen the Council's ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of its services

13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has developed its understanding of how use of assets will change in the future, but does not plan to undertake a complete review until the end of the pandemic.
- the Council has not stated what it wants to achieve over the short, medium and longer-term for its asset base, and is not reviewing progress over the medium or longer term.
- the Council is not actively using benchmarking in its approach to better understand its own performance and identify areas for improvement.

Workforce

The Council has developed a vision for its workforce although this is not complete

14 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Cabinet adopted a vision in February 2022:
 'A Council that supports, empowers and trusts the workforce to work flexibly and productively to provide high-quality services, in a way that substantially reduces our impact on the environment.
 Build on the new ways of providing services that have been developed during the pandemic, by giving staff the flexibility to work flexibly and use technology to work and communicate virtually.'
- whilst the Council Plan states that 'we must ensure that we have the right staff in place with the right skills', the adopted vision does not refer to

ensuring that the Council has the right people, the right place nor at the right cost.

- the Council has demonstrated a clear commitment to ‘Planning the Workforce’ which is included in the ‘Placing the people of Gwynedd at the heart of everything we do’ improvement priority within the Council Plan, which aims to:
 - extend the Apprenticeship Plan to include a higher number of apprentices;
 - implement the internal Talent Development Plan across all Council departments;
 - continue to carry out local recruitment campaigns #GalwGofalwyr across the county, as well as trialling new ideas and methods to attract more applicants;
 - collaborate closely with the departments’ management teams to agree on established arrangements and identify gaps in skills and expertise anticipated over the next five-ten years and to take pro-active steps to address these; and
 - look specifically at the recruitment situation in the children’s social care and adult care fields, looking at ways to increase capacity and the resilience of our workforce.
- however, ‘Planning the Workforce’ appears to be focused on some rather than all departments. It is not fully aligned with current perceived best practice in ‘workforce planning’ as it focuses on a reactive ‘identify and fill in the gaps’ approach rather than active longer-term shaping. Active strategic workforce planning would assist managers to see what is coming, as opposed to seeing and dealing with it once it has arrived, and substantial investment is required to transition fully from a reactive to a proactive method of workforce management.

The Council has engaged with staff and managers as part of its Future Working Arrangements project, and needs to develop longer-term workforce plans, reflecting its pandemic experience, to support service delivery in a more proactive way

15 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has a good understanding of the current workforce challenges which include recruitment and retention of staff in numerous roles.
- Council managers have had discussions with 1,800 staff members to obtain an understanding of their wishes regarding their future working arrangements:
 - 59% stated a preference for a hybrid working arrangement;

- 25% desired working from home; and
- 15% desired to work from an office.
- Human Resources and the Trade Unions worked together to support the implementation of new developments in health and safety.
- the Human Resources team has grown its networks from a predominantly local government family to include a wide range of employers, including Health, Police and Fire, to encourage sharing of practices. The Council also chairs a national group which has been helping with the development of guidelines and good practice.
- the Council has several initiatives, including an Apprenticeship Plan, Cynllun Yfory and Talent Development Plan.
- ‘the Council's Vision for Working in the Future’ report, as presented to the Council’s Cabinet, does not describe how the Council has applied the sustainable development principle and considered the five ways of working, as set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- more integrated thinking would help the Council make the connections between relevant strategies and ensure they are all geared towards delivering the overall vision and strategies that drive the whole of the Council in the same direction.
- embedding the sustainable development principle and its five ways of working would also help the Council amongst others to:
 - develop better working relationships with other providers such as the third sector;
 - work alongside local colleges to ensure that students are trained in the right areas and are familiar with the Council as a prospective employer by the time they finish their qualification; and
 - benefit more from joint working.

The Council maintains an overview of current workforce issues but there is an opportunity to make more use of data and use benchmarking to measure the current and longer-term success of its workforce initiatives

16 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has developed a COVID dashboard that captures key information including sickness rates, posts that have been advertised three times; number of staff redeployed, number of staff testing positive for COVID, percentage of staff absent from work (overall and adults), PPE burn rate, to provide management with an overview of key measures.
- the Council has consulted with managers to see if hybrid and home working arrangements are working to support the delivery of services, gaining an understanding of what works, and what does not.

- workforce-related information in some areas appears to be limited, and a wider understanding of topics such as leavers, success of recruitments and trends in vacancies would provide the Council with a measure of the success of talent-management-related initiatives.
- individuals noted that comparison with other councils is difficult and is not frequently used. These barriers need to be overcome as effective benchmarking is the only way the Council can properly assess its performance and help it identify opportunities to deliver better value.
- the Council has an opportunity to review current internal and regional arrangements to identify those that provide additional value, and areas where improvement or changes are required. However, effective workforce planning needs a full range of current data not only about the workforce but about the demands placed upon it. It is only when equipped with this information that an effective workforce approach can be developed.



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