

Springing Forward – Flintshire County 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. 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 Flintshire County Council invests considerable sums in its building assets and workforce. Some key information from 2020-21 is shown in **Exhibit 1**.

Exhibit 1: key facts and figures relating to building assets and workforce: March 2021

Number of Council buildings owned in 2020-21	530 buildings plus housing stock
Value of property, as at 31 March 2021	Approximately £762 million
Reduction in total office accommodation 2013 to 2019 (in square metres)	2013: 16,204 2019: 14,125
Number of staff	4,730
Percentage of the workforce who were male	35%
Percentage of the workforce who were female	65%
Percentage of staff who work full time	54.9%
Percentage of staff who work part time	45.1%
Percentage of staff aged over 55 years	31.2%
Number of staff who left the Council by their own choice in 2020-21	354

- 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.

What we found

- 7 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.
- 8 Overall, we found that the Council is actively working on its vision and plans across all services but looking further ahead will strengthen the Council's consideration of the sustainable development principle.
- 9 We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council has a clear Asset Management Plan to meet previous corporate objectives but has not yet taken the opportunity to reshape it for the long term ;
 - the Council collaborates with partners on joint property-related initiatives;
 - the Council's asset management plan is monitored but it does not benchmark its performance;
 - the Council has a vision for its future workforce but recognises it needs to refresh it following the lessons learnt during the pandemic;
 - the Council has engaged with staff and managers as part of its Hybrid Working project; and
 - the Council has a good understanding of current workforce issues but does not benchmark its performance.

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 future considerations, building on the experience of the pandemic, to develop a new long-term approach to its assets and workforce, which is integrated with other key plans and supported by costed delivery plans.
Data and benchmarking	
R2	The Council needs to further 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

The Council is actively working on its vision and plans across all services but looking further ahead will strengthen the Council's consideration of the sustainable development principle

Assets

The Council has a clear Asset Management Plan to meet previous corporate objectives but has not yet taken the opportunity to reshape it for the long term

Why setting a clear vision is important

- 10 A clear asset management strategy and well-developed delivery plans are important to identify the intended usage of assets over the short and longer term; the funding available to maintain and develop assets, as well as the anticipated future level of demand for, and cost of, providing services. It is also important to identify how the asset management strategy aligns and is integrated with other relevant strategies including, agile working, workforce, digital and carbon reduction. Learning from the changes brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic can help councils strengthen their ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services.
- 11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:
 - the Council has a corporate Asset Management Plan (AMP) 2020-26. The stated key aim of the AMP is 'to move towards an optimal portfolio of assets'.
 - the Council has considered the assets it needs to deliver its corporate objectives efficiently and this has defined what an optimal portfolio of assets needs to look like. The AMP contributes to the delivery of the Council's well-being objectives. For example, in Flint town centre, the Council used its own land and property to facilitate the development of an extra care scheme and medical centre and over a hundred new affordable homes.
 - the Council has already changed the way it uses its buildings as a result of the pandemic. Agile working patterns for non-front-line staff have reduced the amount of office space needed. There are also examples of changes to front-line services during the pandemic which may reduce the need for buildings if adopted long term, eg front line staff in housing services working from home. As the Council gains a better understanding of how services will be delivered post-COVID-19, it should continue to review its assets to make sure they meet changing needs.

- however, the AMP has not been updated to reflect the post-pandemic environment. The Council's Hybrid Working Policy approved in August 2022 demonstrates a commitment to a new model of working which may 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. Although members and officers we spoke to had an awareness of some of the long-term factors which will influence future need for and use of assets, other than decarbonisation these are not yet formally articulated and reflected in its assets plans. For example, several people we spoke to cited the impact on assets of new technology and a shift to more digital services in future in response to demand from service users.
- the Council needs to put the sustainable development principle at the heart of its future 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 recognises that the existing AMP will need to be refreshed in light of the lessons learnt during the pandemic and its new Corporate Plan. In order to develop new costed delivery plans, the Council will require not only a refreshed AMP but a new medium-term financial strategy.

The Council collaborates with partners on joint property-related initiatives

Why effectively managing the delivery of planned changes to assets is important

- 12 It is important that asset management plans deliver the intended outcomes efficiently and effectively, so that actual expenditure is as close to the levels planned as possible and councils meet their statutory duties. Effective collaboration with other organisations and involving communities about their needs can improve the services delivered to residents. Where councils do not have the range of skills, knowledge, and expertise to effectively manage both ongoing asset management and deliver strategic changes, this may reduce the ability to deliver the intended outcomes.
- 13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:
- the Council has implemented some key projects of its AMP, although other projects are yet to start. Most notably, since 2017 the Council now operates out of just two main offices: County Hall in Mold and Tŷ Dewi Sant, in Ewloe. Over 70% of office-based staff work out of Tŷ Dewi Sant. In the future, the Council plans to move its core central democratic functions from County Hall to new offices and then redevelop the Mold site for other uses. In 2020, the Council demolished the surplus buildings at County Hall in anticipation of the future redevelopment of the site. Office-based staff are also based at five

ancillary offices ('Flintshire Connects' at Flint, Mold, Buckley, Connahs Quay and Holywell).

- the Council can evidence that it actively involves both internal and external stakeholders when making strategic property-asset-related decisions. The Council follows the Participation Cymru National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales. For example, the Council undertook well-publicised engagement with people living in Flint and Connahs Quay on its proposals for a new Household Recycling Scheme.
- the Council regularly collaborates with partners on joint initiatives. The five 'Flintshire Connects' local offices deliver services to the public and vulnerable individuals in their community that find it difficult to access services online or by phone. This sees the co-location of a range of other public services. For example, the Flint Connects office includes North Wales Police and Job Centre Plus.
- the Council works with other neighbouring councils, police and the health board to actively explore future opportunities to share assets and re-use assets surplus to other public bodies.
- during the pandemic, the Council worked with other public bodies to use Flintshire assets as vaccination centres and created a temporary hospital at the Deeside Leisure Centre.
- the Council has an active property disposal programme; no land or buildings are retained unless required for operational, income-generation or strategic-site purposes.

The Council's asset management plan is monitored but the Council does not benchmark its performance

Why effectively reviewing the delivery of planned changes to assets is important

- 14 Councils should use data to monitor whether they are achieving their intended outcomes effectively and efficiently over the short and longer term. Using benchmarking data can provide useful insight into councils' individual performance and can identify opportunities for learning from other organisations.
- 15 In reaching this conclusion we found that:
 - the AMP has 15 clear targets for measuring success and the Capital and Asset Management Programme Board monitors progress.
 - the Council's asset management annual report to councillors at scrutiny committee provides information about the Council's performance against a limited suite of national asset benchmarking indicators. But there is little analysis of long-term trends, and the Council is not actively benchmarking its approach to better understand its own performance and identify areas for improvement.

- the Council collects some local performance data on its assets, which is used to inform decisions, but the data is not shared widely or formally reported to councillors.
- the Council actively participates in regional and national asset management networks. It is a member of the property groups of the Consortium of Local Authorities in Wales and the Association of Chief Estates Surveyors. It also contributes to the National Assets Working Group.

Workforce

The Council has a vision for its future workforce but recognises it needs to refresh it following the lessons learnt during the pandemic

16 Why setting a clear vision is important:

- a clear strategy for its workforce and well-developed delivery plans are important to ensuring an efficient and effective workforce over the short and longer term. It is also important to identify how the workforce strategy aligns and is integrated with other relevant strategies including, asset management, digital and carbon reduction. Learning from the changes brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic can help councils strengthen their ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services.

17 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council does not have an up-to-date Human Resources Strategy, which sets out its approach over the short and long term. Its previous strategy expired in 2019 and does not reflect the current post-pandemic ways of working. The Council plans to refresh the Strategy during 2023. The Council recognises this will require a long-term approach to its strategy, which is integrated with other key strategies and supported by costed delivery plans. The Council should also take the opportunity to use the Sustainable Development principle to shape the development of its new strategy.
- although workforce profile data is well developed and available to all services, workforce planning appears to be focused on some rather than all departments. It is not always 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.

The Council has engaged with staff and managers as part of its Hybrid Working project

Why effectively managing the delivery of planned changes to workforce is important

- 18 It is important that workforce plans deliver the intended outcomes efficiently and effectively so that actual expenditure is as close to the levels planned as possible and councils meet their statutory duties. Effective collaboration with other organisations and involving communities about their needs can improve the services delivered to residents. Where councils do not have the range of skills, knowledge, and expertise to effectively manage both ongoing workforce issues and deliver strategic changes, this may reduce the ability to deliver the intended outcomes.

The post-pandemic hybrid model of agile working is now operational throughout the Council's services

- 19 In reaching this conclusion we found that:
- the post-pandemic hybrid model of agile working set out in its August 2022 Hybrid Working Policy is now operational throughout Council's services.
 - Council managers have had discussions with staff to obtain an understanding of their wishes regarding their future working arrangements.
 - the Council has sought the views of staff and councillors through three surveys during the pandemic to gauge issues of wellbeing and views about hybrid working in the future.
 - Human Resources and the Trade Unions worked together to support the implementation of new developments in health and safety.
 - the Council recognises that it is no longer as competitive for pay in some areas, such as social workers for Children's services, and is paying supplements to temporarily address the issue.
 - long-term 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 a more long-term workforce approach can be developed. Although some demand information is available, most notably for social services workforce demands, at present the Council does not have this information for all its services.

The Council has a good understanding of current workforce issues but does not benchmark its performance

Why effectively reviewing the workforce is important

20 Councils should use data to monitor whether they are achieving their intended outcomes effectively and efficiently over the short and longer term. Using benchmarking data can provide useful insight into councils' individual performance and can identify opportunities for learning from other organisations.

21 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has developed a dashboard for monitoring and reviewing workforce data that captures key information including sickness rates, posts that have been advertised repeatedly; number of staff redeployed, percentage of staff absent from work (overall and adults), to provide management with an overview of key measures. A summary of these statistics is reported to the Council's senior leadership team.
- the Council has consulted with managers and staff 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.
- officers we spoke to felt that benchmarking comparison with other councils is difficult and is not frequently used. These barriers need to be overcome, as effective benchmarking is a way the Council can properly assess if its arrangements deliver value for money.



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