Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

Cyngor Gwynedd Self-assessment 2024/25

Background and Introduction

This is the fourth self-assessment that Cyngor Gwynedd has undertaken under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

The Act requires all Councils in Wales to continually review the extent to which it meets the 'performance requirements', i.e. the extent to which:

i. it is exercising its functions effectively;
ii. it is using its resources prudently, efficiently and effectively;
iii. the Council has robust governance arrangements in place to ensure performance requirements i. and ii.

This year, for the first time, we are considering these three questions in the context of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the priorities in the Council's Plan. The purpose of this 5-year Plan is to set out the Council's vision and priorities for the period from April 2023 to the end of March 2028, so considering the above three questions when detailing our main strengths and weaknesses is a suitable and effective approach to shining a light on the Council's performance.

As part of the development of the Plan we considered a wide range of issues to prioritise and engaged and consulted with local people, elected members, Town and Community Councils and partners. One part of the work that was instrumental in the development of the Council's Plan was the work of *Ardal Ni* which outlines what is good about the area, what is not as good as what needs to be done to create a better area by 2035.

The self-assessment process is intended to encourage honesty, objectivity and transparency about the Council's performance and governance. Although this duty is quite new, the Council is already preparing several documents containing the type of information that we are expected to include within the self-assessment. This includes documents such as Performance, Equality, Director of Social Services' annual reports, Annual Statement of Accounts and the Governance Statement. The Governance Group, which includes officers such as the Corporate Director, Head of Finance, Head of Corporate Services and Head of Legal Service amongst others, has led/taken an overview of this work within the Council. In doing so, the intention is for the work to be owned and led on a strategic level.

It is the Council's intention to undertake a Panel Performance Assessment, which will be made up of independent members. This was originally planned to be done in November last year, but due to the political changes in the Council this was changed to March 2026. A Panel Assessment needs to be carried out at least once within an electoral cycle and is linked to the duty to be carrying out annual self-assessments on performance with these documents forming part of the evidence base.

Our performance challenge and support arrangements have been in place for several years now. These performance challenge and support meetings are held at Departmental level every other month, and focus on the progress of Council Plan projects, service performance (namely the 'day to day' work), and the response to key risks within the Corporate Risk Register. The information then feeds into regular performance reports submitted by each Cabinet Member during the year together with the Annual Performance Report at the end of the financial year. A copy of the Council's Annual Performance Reports can be found on the Council's website here: Performance Measuring. To further strengthen this in the future, there will be adjustments to the performance challenge and support arrangements from April 2025 onwards with an arrangement to report directly to the Scrutiny Committees, which will result in more input into the process from members.

The document includes an assessment of our governance arrangements responding to the 3 performance requirements that Councils are expected to respond to as part of the self-assessment. We have also considered the draft methodology published by the Welsh Local Government Association for Panel Assessments in preparing the self-assessment for 2024/25 and responded to the following questions:

- How well are we doing?
- How do we know that?
- What can we do to improve, and how?

The self-assessment for 2021-22 was our first assessment and steps have been put in place to act on the improvements that had been identified. Some of those improvements were seen to continue in the 2022-23 assessment and in 2023-24 as they are long-term issues, but several additional points were also added. This year, we see the pattern continuing, with the long-term matters re-appearing but with new considerations also being added.

This document is therefore a high-level summary of the Council's performance during 2024/25, categorised as a series of Strengths and Risks under each priority area that align with the priorities set out in the Annual Report and the Council's Plan.

The Strengths are based on:

- highlights of the annual performance report
- feedback received from external audit bodies (e.g. Audit Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales, Estyn etc.)
- issues arising from the internal performance challenge and support process

The Risks are based on:

- our main risks as noted in the corporate risk register
- issues identified by external audit bodies
- other matters we have identified and included in the Council Plan.
- issues arising from the internal performance challenge and support process

It is important to note that many of our strengths are included in the other parts of the annual report, particularly where they relate to the Council's Plan projects and our day-to-day work. To avoid repetition, we (mostly) do not list them in the Self-assessment as well. For the reader, considering the two documents (the Annual Report and the Self-

Assessment) together will give a fuller picture of the Council's performance over the period in question.

While many of the priorities involve cross-departmental responsibilities, it should be noted that 'Efficient Gwynedd' is much more corporate in nature as many of the strengths and weaknesses found here are institutional. This priority is a little different from the rest therefore, which is more inclined to reflect departmental strengths and weaknesses.

An Efficient Gwynedd

Strengths

- The Council has been able to effectively cope with periods of austerity/lack of funding, but the situation is becoming increasingly difficult as the funding provided by the Government has dwindled. The Council is very concerned about the pressure this is putting on the residents of the county to meet the increase in Council Tax, as well as the Council's ability to provide adequate services to the population of Gwynedd within our budget.
- Good corporate Governance Arrangements. To ensure that we deliver our functions effectively, we put performance measures in place to challenge performance across all services. Occasionally, we review these measures to ensure that they continue to be relevant, and we are aware of the need to continuously challenge ourselves and set meaningful measures to allow us to improve consistently. We recognise that there is room for improvement in terms of detailed workflow forward planning over the period of the Council's Plan 2023-28, and as a result we have introduced a series of annual milestones for each of the projects to allow us to measure progress as well as plan work for the future. Work to further improve this continues.
- The Council's Constitution is a public document that sets out the governance arrangements and a Guide to the Constitution is provided to reinforce this. The Governance Group maintains an overview of governance issues within the Council. The Group comprises the Corporate Director, Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer, Head of Corporate Support, Assistant Head of Corporate Support, the Risk and Insurance Manager and the Council's Business Support Service Manager.
- The Council publishes an annual Governance Statement outlining our governance arrangements and their effectiveness following the principles of the CIPFA/Solace Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework.
- The Council has a process to manage risks by having a Corporate Risk Register in place.
- An annual workshop on assurance and risks will be held with external auditors (Audit Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn).
- When recommendations are issued by external audit bodies, an institutional response will be prepared on behalf of the Council and the Governance and Audit Committee is responsible for reviewing and assessing the response along with progress against the recommendations.
- Also, there are appropriate arrangements in place to respond to any reports from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

- Principal governance risks are scored corporately and on a Departmental level, since the risk level varies. There is an in-house Governance Group with an overview and responsibility for quality assurance within Cyngor Gwynedd.
- The Council has commissioned *Local Partnerships* to undertake a review of our governance arrangements, with a view to providing the Council with an independent and objective challenge as well as offering any recommendations for improvement. It will pay particular attention to:
    i. Undertake a rigorous review of our existing arrangements including our governance and financial arrangements.
    ii. Review our governance arrangements in the context of the current Constitution to assess whether it is fit for purpose.
    iii. Assess whether the Annual Governance Statement fulfils its purpose.
    iv. Identify how we meet the full range of statutory requirements in decision-making, e.g. Equality, the Well-being of Future Generations Act, the Welsh language.
    v. Evaluate how we identify and assess risks and review and monitor them.
    vi. Evaluate how we monitor and deliver recommendations for improvement from external and internal regulators and learn lessons across the organisation.
    vii. Identify what we can do to strengthen our governance arrangements for the future.
- We are aware that there is a need to continue reviewing the procedure of identifying and scoring risks, particularly to ensure consistency across the organisation in terms of the assessment and scoring process. As part of this work, we will improve the training offered to managers on risk management. In addition, we are going to review the extent to which specific measures are being introduced to address the risk manage to effectively reduce the risks. We will also consider whether we should add a record of the score that considers any mitigation, as well as the current risk score (which is only a result of the *effect x likelihood*). The work of Audit Wales to undertake a Review of the Council's Risk Management Arrangements during 2025 will feed into this work, along with recommendations from the *Local Partnerships* review.
- The Head of Finance will prepare and promote the authority's risk management policy statement and strategy. The risk management strategy is owned at a corporate level through the Governance Group referred to above and the Governance and Audit Committee which is responsible for challenging the governance risk scores.
- As a part of its service continuity arrangements, the Council has categorised Services from 1 to 4 on the grounds of post-disaster recovery priorities. This enabled the organisation to prioritise during the Covid-19 period and ensured the continuity of 'essential' services. Lessons learned from dealing with the Covid-19 crisis has been valuable in subsequent crises, e.g. the war in Ukraine.
- While the risk management arrangements and strategies for the future are generally improving and strengthening, new arrangements have been put in place to try to standardise and seek to reconcile the scores for very high risks. These are presented to the Corporate Management Team every 3 months. During 2025/26, we will also

report on these risks to the Governance and Audit Committee and the Leadership Team twice a year (in September and February)

- Based on the work of Internal Audit completed during 2024/25, it was considered that Cyngor Gwynedd's internal control framework during that financial year was operating at a level of reasonable assurance on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Authority's governance, risk management and internal control framework.
- Gwynedd is a host authority for several different partnerships and provides effective support for them.
- There are robust arrangements in place for supporting Elected Members in Gwynedd, with 97% of Gwynedd Councillors reporting that the service provided by the Democracy Team is good/very good. We will continue to build on these solid foundations in the year ahead.
- The Head of Finance has undertaken a self-assessment of compliance with the CIPFA Financial Management Code and updates it at least once a year and the current assessment shows high compliance across all standards. In 2025, we have commissioned CIPFA to undertake an independent check of the self-assessment, and the results of this work will be considered when designing financial support services for the future.
- The Apprenticeship Scheme has provided an opportunity for **81** apprentices since 2019 (which is one of the highest numbers in Wales compared to the population and size of other Councils). There are numerous examples of the success of the Scheme, with several individuals who have embarked on the Apprenticeship Scheme receiving promotions and permanent positions within the Council. Similarly, the Graduate Scheme ('Cynllun Yfory') has provided an opportunity for **37** professional trainees since 2017 with many of them having been offered a job with the Council. For 2025, a total of 21 new jobs are available, namely 13 apprentice jobs and 8 graduate jobs. The job areas range – from new areas such as Energy and working with Councillors, to established ones such as Software Engineering, Finance and Pensions and Mechanics, to name but a few.
- The 2024 Staff Voice Survey was conducted during a challenging period that included fiscal uncertainty, political changes in the Council, and a period of further changes to our 'working for the future' working arrangements following the pandemic. As a result, there has been a slight decrease in the level of staff satisfaction in response to most of the questions, but the level of satisfaction remains high for some of the key indicators e.g. the score for the statement 'the Council is a good place to work' is 80%, and 87% for "I've been motivated to do my best in my job for the benefit of the people of Gwynedd." As in last year's survey, this year's survey consisted of 4 parts – Me and my Well-being, Me and my job, Me and my service and Me and my Employer.

  Some of the themes that emerged last year are repeated, particularly issues around receiving appreciation and recognition, and these remain points for improvement. More staff are also expressing concern about work pressures, which may be a result of the financial squeeze that has faced the council over recent years, and this will also receive further attention.

1,330 staff completed the Staff Voice questionnaire, which is approximately 21.8% of staff who had the opportunity to answer the survey. **50.6%** noted that they agreed or strongly agreed that **the Council is carrying out its duties effectively.**
40.9% agreed or strongly agreed **that the Council made the best use of the resources at its disposal**, and **48.6%** agreed or strongly agreed **that the Council has arrangements in place to ensure that it performs effectively.**
Going forward, awareness-raising meetings for the Staff Voice Survey will be held with representatives from each department, with the main aim of increasing the number of staff participating. We will also work closely with Heads of Department to encourage engagement through regular communication and weekly updates on the number of staff who have completed the survey.

- Trade Unions were consulted and asked for feedback on the following areas:
    - Comments on the authority's performance and areas for improvement
        - Is the Council carrying out its duties effectively?
        - Is the Council making the best use of the resources at its disposal?
        - Does the Council have arrangements in place to ensure it performs effectively?
    - Tips for improving staff engagement and wellbeing

  Among the responses, it was noted that there was room for improvement in communication with unions regarding staffing issues in some departments, and there was a recognition that we had some way to go in terms of Social Partnership (when groups such as local government, businesses and trade unions work together to make decisions) because this is a learning process.

- The Council gathers the views of the people of the county in many ways to improve services and to meet the legal requirement for councils to engage with residents under various acts such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. This year, Gwynedd was part of the National Resident Survey, the first of its kind to be conducted in Wales. While we are aware of the limitations of such a survey, it is an additional means of gathering opinions and we will triangulate the findings with other data and information we collect to ensure that we respond appropriately. One particular advantage of this survey is that it allows us to compare our results with other councils, something that has not been possible with internal surveys alone. There were 3,094 responses to the survey and the results include:

    i. Percentage of respondents who are fairly or very satisfied with how the Council is running things:

    Gwynedd: 31% (3rd out of 9 councils that took part in the survey)

    ii. Percentage of respondents who generally believe that the council provides high quality services (to some extent or to a large extent):

    Gwynedd: 55% (3rd out of 9 councils that took part in the survey)

    iii. Percentage of respondents who generally believe that the council provides services that represent good value for money (to some extent or to a large extent):

    Gwynedd: 43% (3rd out of 9 councils that took part in the survey)

    Other results seen in the survey include:

iv. Percentage of respondents who generally believe that the council takes residents' views into account when making a decision (to some extent or to a large extent):

Gwynedd: 27% (2nd out of 9 councils that took part in the survey)

v. Percentage of respondents who generally believe that the council is acting on the concerns of local residents (to some extent or to a large extent):

Gwynedd: 30% (2nd out of 9 councils that took part in the survey)

vi. The percentage of respondents who agree somewhat or strongly that contacting the council is simple:

Gwynedd: 50% (1st in Wales of the 9 councils that took part in the survey)

vii. Percentage of respondents who agree little or strongly that up-to-date information about council services is easy

Gwynedd: 45% (1st in Wales of the 9 councils that took part in the survey)

viii. Percentage of respondents who trust the council to a large or very large extent

Gwynedd: 37% (joint 3rd of the 9 councils that took part in the survey)

- We also prepare an annual report on complaints and continuously adjust our services when observations or complaints suggest improvements.
  The number of Valid Formal Complaints has decreased this year compared to last year, but those that have gone to the Ombudsman have increased. We are still working on reducing the time taken to respond to complaints and aim for the new Customer Contact Charter being developed to have a positive impact on this.
- We are aware of the need to be vigilant to avoid 'consultation fatigue' as we are already seeking the views of our residents on many various topics and schemes, and as a result we have a cross-departmental Engagement Group which meets to gather information on proposed consultations, and to share results and good practice. This helps to ensure that there is sufficient time to plan consultations and avoid duplication.
- The Procurement Team provides advice and support to services, and ensures that the organisation adheres to regulations and best practice in the procurement field. The team's aim is to enable the Council to achieve value for money, strengthen and develop procurement expertise, adopt best practice in the field and support the local market. There are also Category Management arrangements in place, where three Category Teams (Environmental, Corporate and People) are responsible for procurement in specific areas looking at procurement strategically, placing an emphasis on collaboration and carrying out a thorough analysis of the market to try and ensure we get value for money.
- The Council has already adopted the Sustainable Procurement Policy which complies with the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. By adopting the Policy, the intention is to consider the possible social, economic and environmental impact that our procurement decisions can have and what steps can be taken to make the best possible use of the Council's expenditure, for the benefit of the county.

- In 2024/25 the Council was shortlisted for the Welsh procurement award (GO Awards). The nomination is for our efforts to seek to gain social value in the procurement of our food provision across the County.
- The Council has also been preparing for the New National Procurement Regulations, known as the Procurement Act 2023. The Corporate Procurement Team and the Category Team have been busy preparing for the new arrangements and work systems. It is expected that the new Procurement Legislation will encourage public institutions to share what they intend to procure soon while also following simpler and more transparent procurement arrangements.
- Ongoing work is underway to support businesses to respond to requirements in tenders as a result of any developments in the field, such as gaining accreditations or responding to the requirements of the new Legislation. We continue to work with the supply chain to assess the environmental impact and seek to reduce the carbon footprint, helping businesses with the new procurement arrangements will be a priority next year.
- Considerable work has been done during the year to ensure/confirm an understanding among our management that the nine work streams within the Ffordd Gwynedd scheme are in fact our organisation development plan. This is the scheme that works towards ensuring that we have a satisfied and healthy workforce, who are given the necessary support and training to enable us to develop the culture to put the people of Gwynedd at the centre of everything we do.
- We have been working on courses/e-modules that managers can use with their teams to ensure their understanding of the culture being sought, and to support them through the process of conducting Ffordd Gwynedd service reviews. We have already started trialling some of the courses with small groups of staff and have received positive feedback.
- In a nutshell, this is the most obvious increase during the second year of the Ffordd Gwynedd Scheme.

  Learn, Experiment and Act to Improve - The emphasis in the current Plan on carrying out reviews on smaller pieces of work systems, as well as carrying out reviews on whole systems, has borne fruit and all Departments in the Council are able to provide examples of reviews that have led to improvements during the year.

  Leadership - The new Ffordd Gwynedd training programme has been reintroduced for managers during the year while the Manager Development Programme goes from strength to strength with the positive feedback from attendees.

  Support and Develop - A new Learning and Development Framework has been launched with the programme for the first year focusing on basic training such as finance management, well-being and digital skills. The Senior Leadership Programme, the Manager Development Programme and the Women in Leadership Programme continue to demonstrate their value with a large number of officers eager to sign up on each occasion when a new series is announced.

  Workforce Planning and Talent Development - seven work streams have been identified for driving this work forward. They range from conducting a

"Ffordd Gwynedd" exercise on the whole process of attracting staff to work for the Council, to the need to establish specific training plans that address rare skills and expertise, as well as the appropriate behaviours, that are necessary to the future continuity of service.

A Satisfied and Healthy Workforce - A new Well-being Strategy was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 17 December 2024. The Strategy is based on three pillars, namely leadership and management, sustainable support, and a work environment with mental, physical, social and financial well-being at the heart of what is sought to be achieved.

Customer Contact - A cross-departmental Group has been established to draw up a Customer Contact Charter. That Charter, in its final draft form, will be submitted to Cabinet for adoption on 8 July 2025. There has been comprehensive consultation on the content of the Charter across Council services, and this is a good example of seeking views on developments with staff.

- From the point of view of the Council's internal activities, we have good engagement and communication arrangements in place and a space with important messages centrally shared with staff in a variety of ways including a weekly staff bulletin, a staff Facebook group, the intranet, staff self-service, the Gair o Gyngor magazine, front-line staff visits and Q&A sessions with the Chief Executive. In addition to this, departmental and managerial communication activities take place on a regular basis.
- An extensive training programme for Elected Members was provided during 2024/25 which included core training in seven specific areas:
    i. Safe Leadership and Personal Safety
    ii. Code of Conduct
    iii. The Well-being of Future Generations Act
    iv. Safeguarding Children and Adults
    v. Your Responsibility for Equality
    vi. Your Responsibility as a Corporate Parent
    vii. Information about People: Your Responsibility
- In addition to this, training was offered in several other areas as well as the opportunity for each Councillor to receive a personal development interview to identify specific areas of development. There is an offer for councillors to have specific sessions before they undertake roles on different committees, e.g. Cabinet Members, and several other committees such as Planning, Licensing and Governance and Audit. Furthermore, briefings will also be held for members, which are an opportunity to present an update on important issues e.g. when there are changes in legislation etc.
- We as a Council take advantage of opportunities to innovate and embed digital technology to improve the lives of our residents, to work better with partners, and to strengthen and improve the responsiveness of our services to the needs and expectations of our customers. To assist us with this, in 2023 Cyngor Gwynedd's new Digital Plan for the five years from 2023-28 was approved. The period of this Plan coincides with the period of the Council Plan (in the same way as the period of the

Ffordd Gwynedd Plan). Funding has been secured to drive the Digital Plan's first two-year work programme and several further priorities are in place.

- The cyber team was strengthened by the promotion of an apprentice to a permanent role with the Council, two data science degree apprentices were supported, and extensive advances were made on the integrated telephone system, organisation management system and analogue to digital line upgrades projects during 2024/25. Many of these projects will be completed during 2025/26, with the integrated telephone system in full development and already rolled out in various locations. Another project that will see significant growth this year is the organisation management system, and it is expected that a new system for salary payment and the administration of Human Resources matters will be in place during 2026/27. There is constant and ongoing development with the upgrade of our analogue lines, and this will continue until the end of 2026, and we hope to welcome a new Digital Transformation Trainee to the Council during the summer through the Council's trainee and apprenticeship programme.

Risks

- Setting a balanced budget for 25/26 is a challenge, particularly given the need to ensure that departmental budgets are adequate to provide the necessary level of services for the people of Gwynedd, and to avoid overspending as seen in 2024/25. At that time there was a departmental overspend of £6.6m with significant overspend in the Departments of Adults, Health and Well-being, Children and Families, Highways, Engineering and YGC and Environment.
- A new savings programme was introduced as one of the Council's top priorities in responding to the latest financial situation, and the Council agreed a £650,000 savings programme in setting the 2025/26 budget in addition to savings of £6.4million in setting the 2023/24 budget, and a further savings of £5.2million in setting the 2024/25 budget. Cabinet approved a 'Medium Term Financial Plan' for Cyngor Gwynedd up to the 2027/28 financial year in May 2024. As part of this Plan, a range of measures and work packages have been established to prepare for the significant gap in the Council's budget over the next three years, under the guidance of the Chief Executive. An updated version of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (until the end of the 2028/29 financial year) was presented to the Cabinet on the 16th of September 2025.
- During 2024, Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council's financial sustainability including a focus on the actions, plans and arrangements to bridge funding gaps and address financial pressures over the medium term. It found that there had been a significant increase in the number of departments in the Council that overspent in the last two financial years, and that the Council had developed arrangements to review its budgets.
- An internal review is underway to improve our Council Tax collection arrangements, and actions have been introduced to increase collection rates in the future. This work will continue to receive attention over the coming year. We are also eager to ensure that issues such as this receive early attention in the future, and we will look to review our arrangements to ensure that this happens.

- Over the past year, there have been changes in the Council's political leadership, with several new Cabinet Members taking on responsibilities across a range of areas. In addition, appointments to senior officer positions are expected over the coming months. These changes may pose challenges to consistent leadership and cause delays in strategic decision-making, but we recognise this and intend to address the issue appropriately.
- Difficulties in recruiting for jobs in some key areas such as social care and education can jeopardise the continuity of service. The concern about this has led to the creation of a special project in the Council's Plan - 'Workforce Planning' - which will address the challenge and offer a range of solutions. The Governance and Audit Committee has indicated in the past that workforce planning, succession planning and managerial succession should be considered as possible areas for the Panel Performance Assessment. Having rescheduled the date for the Panel Assessment, it is likely that this will be further considered ahead of their March 2026 visit. In addition, Audit Wales will conduct a study on 'Responding to workforce pressures in local government' during 2025/26.
- The Council is part of several local and regional partnerships such as the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board and the North Wales Economic Ambition Board. It would be fair to note that the effectiveness of these partnerships varies at the moment, and we will continue to work to try to ensure that we benefit from these arrangements. Similarly, our relationship with the third sector continues to evolve and we, with the support of the Third Sector Liaison Group, will be looking at this again during 2025/26.
- The work of ensuring that equality is deeply rooted within the Council's work to improve our services for all the people of Gwynedd continues. A Strategic Equality Plan for 2024-28 was developed to provide a framework to improve fairness within the Council, and to ensure that we treat people according to their needs, and this work continues.
- As has already been noted, the Cyngor Gwynedd Plan 2023-28 was adopted during 2023. The Plan is ambitious in an extremely challenging financial climate. Although consideration has been given to the resources required to deliver what is within the Plan as it is developed, the financial situation has changed significantly since then, and if the financial squeeze continues, it may mean that the Council will have to adjust or reduce our ambitions and as a result the number of projects that we will be able to fully complete within the period.
- The Finance Department, in close contact with the Chief Executive and Directors, undertakes ongoing reviews of the Council's financial forecasts over the next three years, updating the model regularly when new information is received and reporting regularly to Cabinet members and to the Corporate Management Team (Chief Executive, Directors and Department Heads). The corporate planning cycle coincides with the statutory cycle of budget planning, and we aim to present the annual update of the Council Plan to the same meeting of the Full Council as the budget.
- Every year, the Council prepares a Financial Strategy and sets a balanced Budget to ensure continuity of service. The Council also publishes a Statement of Accounts at the end of every financial year, which shows its annual expenditure. The review of expenditure against budgets and monitoring that savings have been achieved by all Council departments, ensures that the services are operating efficiently. However,

as noted earlier, the increasing pressures on the Council's budget are making it harder for departments to maintain the same level of services within the budget provided, which leads to a risk of overspending.

- The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 has created new duties for Political Group Leaders to take an element of responsibility over promoting good conduct and collaboration with the Standards Committee. Agreement was reached on a protocol and criteria to assess the discharge of the duty at a workshop between members of the Committee and Leaders. These were adopted by the Standards Committee, and they will contribute towards preparing the Committee's annual report. This work has been supported by meetings and regular communication with the Monitoring Officer.

A Caring Gwynedd

Strengths

- Timely and good quality Statutory Reviews are carried out to ensure that care and support plans remain appropriate.
- An improvement in outcomes for people who receive domiciliary care because of the use of technology and alternative methods of service provision. Almost two-thirds of Gwynedd's telecare devices have now been transferred to new digital devices.
- Strategic planning developments - Llechen Lân has been published and i-Lechen is being implemented.
- As part of the Home Care Work Programme there is particular attention to developing suitable and appropriate information and data systems and ensuring ownership and control of the most relevant and operational roles in the domiciliary care field/system.
- Following the Improvement Check Visit undertaken by Care Inspectorate Wales in October 2024, it was noted that: "The entire professional workforce of the service in terms of social workers and occupational therapists has been employed by the local authority. This means it doesn't rely on agency staff and offers people a more consistent service. People also benefit from a professional workforce that can offer a service through the medium of Welsh."
- We employ a dedicated practitioner to support and train people to set up micro businesses, and Care Inspectorate Wales identifies this as good practice, adding: "The local authority should continue its work to promote the care and support options available including the number of micro-carers available, in line with its duty to provide information, advice and support and preventive services."
- Care Inspectorate Wales stated in their Improvement Check Visit (October 2024):
    - The leaders are experienced and provide stable leadership, and the practitioners say they are visible and easy to approach.
    - The leaders appreciate the dedication of the practitioners. The practitioners are committed and exceed expectations when it comes to supporting people. They obviously know the people they support very well.
    - Positively, as noted in the last performance evaluation inspection, practitioners continue to feel that they are well supported. 94% of

practitioners who completed our survey indicated that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they were well supported by their colleagues and leaders.

- Departmental budgets were reviewed to consider the additional resources needed to complete any action plans, and to deal with historic budget shortfalls in some departments (e.g. social services). This is intended to ensure that the services provided can be provided within the base budget to support the financial sustainability of the Council. Revision of provisions in budgets will continue over the next year in the preparation of the 2026/27 budget.

Risks

- If there is an insufficient and inefficient provision of domiciliary care, residential homes and nursing, it could lead to harm, increasing needs and additional costs. Among the steps we are taking to deal with this is a new project in the Council's Plan – Llechen Lân – which has analysed the demographics of Gwynedd; the demand for service; and adult social services best practices to understand and highlight the demand for service and associated resources that will be needed for the next twenty years.
- To ensure the highest quality services and effectively manage costs, the teams need to collaborate on a multi-disciplinary level with partners such as health, police, the third sector, and care providers. Steps have already been taken to strengthen these partnerships although there is further work to be done, for example to further develop the collaborative relationship with the Health Board.
- If enough staff cannot be recruited, there is a risk that the best services cannot be provided to the people of Gwynedd. We have therefore recently reviewed salaries and introduced the Llechen Lân project, as well as introducing a Care Academy to try and improve the situation and we intend to take additional steps shortly as well.
- If Business and Care Commissioning services are not effective and efficient, there is a risk to the safety of individuals and staff, as well as a risk that we do not provide quality services to the residents of Gwynedd. Several steps have been taken to respond to this, including the introduction of a new social services recording system. However, even though we are introducing a new system, we will have to work with the existing system without support for a period of several months. This is a very high risk, but it is a national issue, and work is underway to mitigate the risk.
- In certain specific circumstances, the Council can make a DoLS (Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards) authorisation in order to protect a person who lacks the mental capacity to accept care or treatment to keep them safe from harm. The Council has a waiting list for DoLS assessments because a qualified officer is needed to complete them, and they need to be reviewed regularly. There is a legal and financial risk associated with failing to carry out the assessments in a timely manner, and the Council is aware of this and is taking steps to improve the situation.
- A weak relationship with institutional stakeholders could lead to a failure to provide quality services to the people of Gwynedd. Steps are being taken to ensure a good relationship between organisations, as well as to try to simplify the working relationship which can be overly complex due to legislative barriers.

- Failure to have mental health assessments outside of working hours would leave individuals at risk and face mental health distress without proper support.
- An increase in demand for services coupled with an increase in the complexity of needs, leads to budgetary pressures and risk of overspending.
- It is projected that Cyngor Gwynedd's population will increase by 5% between 2024 and 2043 from 125,900 to 132,200, including a projected 3% increase in the number of children, a 1% increase in the number of working age population and a 16% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over.
- The data collected on assessments and support for unpaid carers needs to be improved, as set out by Care Inspectorate Wales in their Improvement Check Visit (October 2024): "This is essential to ensure that it fulfils its statutory duty to assess whether a carer needs care and support (or is likely to need care and support in the future) and if so, what needs they are likely to have."

Tomorrow's Gwynedd

Strengths

- The outcomes of primary and secondary school inspections are generally strong.
- Support to meet the needs of learners/Welsh-language provision - including the Immersion Education system.
- During an inspection in 2023, Estyn found that the authority firmly promotes and supports pupils' well-being. This was further confirmed at Assurance and Risk Assessment meetings in 2024 and 2025.
- We continue to make improvements to schools across the county, and in particular the Bangor, Cricieth and Bontnewydd area and have taken every opportunity to apply for grant aid to enable us to modernise existing buildings and develop new buildings. A new building and campus for Ysgol Treferthyr in Cricieth has opened its doors to learners in early September 2024. This follows years of work, and an investment of over £8m to secure the highest quality learning environment and resources for up to 150 learners in the area. In addition, there is childcare provision on the site, as well as an ABC Unit.

Risks

- Changes in the county's demographics affect the viability of the current school system and increase the lack of equity that exists due to the significant variation in cost per capita per pupil.
- Arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and promoting pupil attendance need to be improved. Attendance levels remain a concern following the pandemic-induced slump. Attendance is also a priority for the Government and Estyn. We will be introducing an Attendance Strategy in 2025, and we have strengthened our processes by improving the systems for targeting attendance. We have also made use of Welsh Government grants to improve capacity and a campaign to improve attendance.

- We will strengthen provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and ensure arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of that provision. We have created a new plan for September 2025, which is to create a multi-site Pupil Referral Unit to provide high level support for some pupils and strengthen support for these learners in our schools.
- A fundamental change in school improvement support following the end of GwE. With such a significant change, it is inevitable that it may affect the quality of support in terms of improving schools and standards.
- To provide quality support to schools that are in a follow-up category following Estyn audits.
- During the year, there were serious cases of offences against children, including a high-profile case where the former headteacher of Ysgol Friars, Neil Foden, was arrested and sentenced to 17 years in prison for sexual offences against pupils. This case has highlighted significant failures in the council's safeguarding systems over a number of years.
- In response, the Council has reviewed its safeguarding policies and procedures, commissioned independent reviews, and contributed to a regional Child Practice Review led by an independent chair. The Education Scrutiny Committee has also launched a review of safeguarding arrangements in schools across Gwynedd, with the aim of improving standards and ensuring the safety of children. The formal review is expected to present lessons and recommendations in the autumn of 2025.
- There is a significant risk that failure to ensure safeguarding arrangements in schools meet the highest standards, or failure to implement the lessons from the review, could lead to continued safeguarding failures, harm to children and young people, loss of public trust, legal consequences, and pressure on the Council's resources.

A Prosperous Gwynedd

Strengths

- As part of a new Regeneration Framework, a Local Regeneration Plan has been prepared for each of the 13 regeneration areas in the County. The plans reflect local priorities highlighted during the 'Ardal Ni' consultation with Gwynedd residents. The Local Regeneration Plans incorporate projects that are being developed by a wide range of organisations and groups active in the area and contribute to the economically, environmentally, socially or culturally improvement of areas to create healthy, thriving, dynamic and sustainable communities with a prominent and central place for the Welsh language.
- The 'Gwynedd and Eryri Sustainable Visitor Economy Plan 2035' has been jointly developed by Cyngor Gwynedd and the Eryri National Park Authority. This is a groundbreaking scheme and introduces a new way of operating, supporting and measuring the impact of the entire visitor economy on the area.
- We have been successful in securing significant funding from sources such as the Shared Prosperity Fund and ARFOR to strengthen Gwynedd's economy. Together with our partners we have allocated £24.4 million from the Shared Prosperity Fund to schemes that have contributed towards strengthening Gwynedd's economy,

improving skills and creating pride in our communities. Over 960 businesses, enterprises and organisations have received support creating or safeguarding almost 300 jobs, and over 700 people have gained a new qualification.

- Town Centre Schemes have been created for several towns in Gwynedd. The purpose of these is to identify and agree action plans and set priorities for individual towns. The Town Centre Schemes give particular attention to high street areas, with the intention of making them more attractive places to visit and work, and to encourage people to spend their time and money there.
- A Cross Departmental Vacant Properties Group has been established to co-ordinate the efforts of the various Council Services dealing with vacant properties. The Group has adopted a range of interventions – including the provision of information, technical advice, financial assistance, as well as enforcement arrangements. We intend to develop this work further over the next year.
- Since gaining UNESCO World Heritage Site status for the North West Wales Slate Landscape in 2021, the Council and its partners have been trying to make the most of the designation. This includes the Llewyrch o'r Llechi and LleCHI LleNI project – schemes worth over £30m and supported through Cyngor Gwynedd, UK Government, Welsh Government, Heritage Lottery Fund, Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales and several other partners – which are already underway to improve understanding, pride and economic and social opportunities in our slate valleys and across the area.

Risks

- The ARFOR programme ended at the end of March 2025 and although the SPF programme has been extended for the 2025-26 year, that is on a smaller scale than what has been seen in the past. Significant uncertainty exists regarding the finances and administration of any future economic development programs.
- There is a risk that we may miss an opportunity to secure the best economic benefit for Gwynedd through the Growth Plan (North Wales Ambition).

A Homely Gwynedd

Strengths

- The Housing and Property department is working closely with its housing partners on social and intermediate housing developments to meet the huge demand for housing in Gwynedd.
- Through the Buy-to-Let Scheme, the Council buys homes off the open market to let them to residents in need of housing.
- In order to bring more empty homes back into use, there are a number of interventions available for the people of Gwynedd to take advantage of.
- The Department has been successful in attracting additional funding from the Welsh Government to deliver more affordable housing developments.

- The development of the Penrhos site, Pwllheli, is underway, after the Council, in partnership with Clwyd Alyn housing association, secured an additional grant of around £7.7m from the Welsh Government to enable the start of phase 1 of the development.
- The Council helps many county residents avoid or get out of fuel poverty by providing support to insulate houses, receive effective heating equipment and eco-friendly upgrades such as solar panels and air source heat pumps.

Risks

- Homelessness remains a challenge even though several new interventions have recently been introduced. We will continue to implement many ambitious schemes including the development of several additional sites across the county.
- Although there is much to welcome in the Homelessness and Social Housing Allocation (Wales) Bill, it may require a lot of additional resources to implement.
- There is concern that the public don't have easy and clear access to an enquiry and advice service on housing matters. As part of the Housing Action Plan, we will soon be launching a Housing 'One Stop Shop' to support residents with their queries.
- Support for planning applications to build social housing.

A Green Gwynedd

Strengths

- Consistently managed to meet statutory recycling targets in the past.
- Have set an ambition of being net zero carbon by 2030 and adopted a 'Climate and Nature Emergency Plan' to meet the ambition.
- A Flood Strategy has been adopted which highlights the current and future risks of flooding and coastal erosion in the county and how the risks will be managed.
- The percentage of respondents to the National Residents' Survey who find it fairly or very easy to book the recycling and waste centre in Gwynedd is 89% (1st in Wales of the 9 councils that took part in the survey).
- A scheme which provides grant support to improve the energy use performance of housing in the county is having a positive impact.
- Attracted significant grants from the Government to fund renewable energy schemes, an electric vehicle fleet and public and fleet charging points.
- Willingness to experiment and innovate – Welsh Government grants and capital from the Council will fund a pilot project to convert a care home to the Passivhaus standard, aiming to reduce carbon emissions by 94%.
- Working with external partners – the Council leads the Gwynedd Nature Partnership.
- In line with the Council's Green Fleet Plan, when vehicles need to be replaced, we have been converting to electric vehicles where possible. 48% of the Council's cars and vans are now electric vehicles.

Risks

- To meet the national recycling target of 70% and avoid a financial penalty, residents' behaviours need to change so that they recycle more and reduce the residual waste that needs to be collected.
- Waste treatment sites need to be modernised as well as improvements made to our recycling centres.
- There is a significant risk of coastal flooding which could have a detrimental impact on many communities such as Fairbourne.
- Failure to meet frequency targets in relation to food hygiene inspections and food standards.
- The Council's 'Climate and Nature Emergency Plan 2022/23 - 2029/30' sets an ambition which notes that "Cyngor Gwynedd will be carbon net zero and ecologically positive by 2030." The Plan includes a broad range of projects to reduce carbon emissions and absorb carbon across many fields: buildings and energy, movement and transportation, waste, procurement, governance, land use, ecology. We acknowledge that reaching net zero is a long-term task, but this plan sets several specific milestones for us to measure our annual progress up to 2030. There are so many policy, legislative and budgetary factors that are beyond the Council's control and are having a huge impact on the Council's ability to deliver many of our projects, such as electricity grid network supplies or investment in energy and heating buildings. Nevertheless, the Council has chosen to spend substantial funding from our coffers to deliver many of our projects in our Climate and Nature Emergency Plan, and £3m was earmarked for the work. Despite the investment however, the uncertainty from the perspective of external factors means that meeting the ambition to be ...'net zero carbon and ecologically positive by 2030' remains a practical and financial risk for the Council.
- Although the Council has invested £3M of its own funding since 2022, which is a continuation of significant investment in carbon saving schemes since 2010, there is a real risk to not having the funding or human resources to deliver the Climate and Nature Emergency Plan as a whole.
- Work is ongoing to ensure that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and other statutory requirements are fully integrated within our corporate planning frameworks, rather than in a way that is responsive and fragmented in nature. To assist with this, a new template was introduced to plan reports to the Cabinet, which leads officers to refer to the various statutory requirements, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, when preparing their reports.

A Welsh Gwynedd

Strengths

- The Welsh language is a key part of all the Council's work, and any plans that affect the people of Gwynedd. Welsh is the Council's main administrative language, which means that we are one of the largest employers in the country who use Welsh on a day-to-day basis in the workplace.
- We offer opportunities for staff to develop their language skills including training to learn Welsh and to further develop Welsh language skills across all levels.
- The Council has modernised and expanded the immersion provision for learning Welsh to children and intends to further increase the provision of Welsh-medium education in the county.

Risks

- There may be a perception by some that a 'University standard' Welsh is needed to work for the Council, and while that is not accurate, it may affect recruitment to some posts.
- Welsh-speaking young people are migrating.

Additional improvements identified for 2025-26
• In response to the recommendations of a study by Audit Wales we will be looking to improve our service commissioning arrangements.
• Manage the impact of the significant changes that have recently taken place in the Council's political leadership and among Heads of Department.
• Improve training on risk identification and management.
• To act on the relevant recommendations in the Local Partnerships report.
• Consider how we can build on the resident survey organised by the Welsh Local Government Association/Data Cymru and obtain more information/evidence to enable us to improve services.
• Implement further steps to improve compliance with the Social Partnership Duty.
• Act on the findings of the Staff Voice Survey, including staff appreciation and well-being.

Improvements that have been identified within past Self Assessments and will continue into 2025/26.

Improvement	
We will:	**Our progress to date**
• Review the procedure of identifying and scoring risks, particularly to ensure consistency across the organisation in terms of the assessment and scoring process.	• Over the past few months, the Chief Executive and Corporate Directors have been looking specifically at the very high risks. The intention is to ensure that the right risks are included in the list and to try to ensure consistency in how they are scored.
• Continue the work to strengthen our internal arrangements to ensure that statutory requirements/guidance or legislation is a core element and better integrated with our corporate planning work.	• During 2024/25 it was planned to hold a session with the Leadership Team on the Future Generations Act led by the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner as well as holding further training sessions for the remaining members. The member training sessions were held in the Autumn. • It was originally planned to hold a session with the Leadership Team in November, but due to the political changes that have taken place in the Council it has not been possible to hold the session. • During June/July 2025 Local Partnerships will be looking at governance arrangements within the Council and as part of this work they will be looking at how we are operating in this area and making recommendations

	for improvement (if necessary).
• Continue work on reviewing the Council's Asset Plan to ensure that priorities remain current in light of the experiences and developments of recent years.	• Drawing up a new Asset Management Plan is a project in the Council Plan for 2023-28. • Policy review work has been carried out and discussions have taken place with a significant number of Departments. A draft Asset Plan is in place but requires modifications and resolution to be adopted. • When the Corporate Property Management Strategy is approved, it will be possible to proceed to prepare a Property Asset Action Plan (the timetable of which will be subject to the Corporate Strategy).
• Looking to develop a way to measure value for money (efficiency) at service level as part of our performance challenge arrangements.	• We will collaborate with peers in other councils and professional bodies such as CIPFA to develop a framework to be able to identify value for money. This work commenced in 2023/24 and has continued during 2024/25. During 2025/26 we will consider the options available to establish cost-effective benchmarking arrangements with other authorities.
• Continue to implement a project to address the existing staff recruitment problems that the Council is experiencing.	• The 'Workforce Planning' Project, which is a part of the Council Plan for 2023-28, is addressing this. • Work to create a matrix of key, risk-assessed posts for the continuity of the Council's key services (particularly in the areas of care and education) has begun but further work remains to be done. • There is an intention to carry out a review of the whole process of attracting staff to work for the Council, with the aim of continuing to improve the process for all involved - particularly job applicants.

Completed improvements from 2024/25

Improvement	
We will:	**Solution**
• Improve our forward planning over the period of the Council Plan 2023-28, by setting a series of annual milestones for the various projects in the Council Plan.	• At the start of 2024/25, milestones were provided by the Project Leaders for every project within the Council Plan. The progress was assessed against these milestones at the performance challenge and support meetings during the year.

• Participate in a national survey arranged by the WLGA to obtain useful information by the County's residents on our performance.	• The Council participated in the national citizens survey arranged by the WLGA and Data Cymru in February/March 2025, with over 3,000 residents responding.
• Complete the actions to improve scrutiny effectiveness in response to the recommendations of the Audit Wales report.	• All actions have been completed after the arrangements for reporting on performance were presented to the Scrutiny Committees at the start of 2025/26.
• Communicate information about service performance, and the Council generally, more effectively to residents.	• Over the past year we have been working on a new performance reporting regime whereby reports will be submitted to the relevant Scrutiny Committees rather than Cabinet meetings. These arrangements are in place from June 2025 and all Council performance measures will now be published rather than a summary of the main ones as in the past.
• Improve understanding and raise awareness of the Council's areas of work amongst County residents.	• Substantial communication work is being done on raising awareness of the Council's activities, including press statements, items on our website and social media. In addition, detailed responses are provided to enquiries from the media about the work of the Council and/or committee reports. A response to the national resident survey shows that these works need to be continued. This is ongoing work that will continue to receive the Council's attention.
• Conduct a staff voice survey (as has been the case in the past) to engage in constant discussion with the workforce and provide them with the opportunity to say what is working well and the barriers they face.	• A Staff Voice Survey was conducted during November/December 2024, comparing the results with the previous year. • The key findings will be shared with members of the Corporate Management Team, and with each Department's management teams individually. The corporate work plan for action on the main findings will be monitored as part of the work of the Ffordd Gwynedd Officers group.
• Conduct an appraisal of the work of the Governance and Audit Committee to establish whether it is effective.	• The Committee has carried out a self-assessment in April 2024 and actions have been identified and acted upon.
• Continue to act on the actions already put in place in response	• By the end of 2024/25 we will have acted on all the recommendations made by Audit

to an audit of performance challenge arrangements undertaken by Audit Wales and continue to review the success of those arrangements and review if necessary.	Wales in their audit of performance challenge arrangements. • The final step in this response will be to submit performance reports to the scrutiny committees rather than the cabinet. This will be operational from the June 2025 round of scrutiny committees.

• Implement the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan Work Programme 2023-28 to continue to improve performance and provide the best possible services for the County's residents.	• The Ffordd Gwynedd Plan annual report for 2024/25 shows that the Council is moving in the right direction in terms of culture and working methods. It is also noted that:
	  • some departments are showing good leadership, but progress is inconsistent across the organisation.
	  • technology and artificial intelligence are key to improving services.
	  • need to expand training and strengthen ongoing evaluation.
	  • reducing absences and increasing ownership of performance are priorities.
	  • talent development plans are positive, but workforce planning is still a challenge.
	  • the vision for quality services is clear – the priority now is to speed up work in all departments.
	Work on the 5-year Plan will continue.

Further evidence for our findings:

Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28

Cyngor Gwynedd Diversity Statement

Cyngor Gwynedd's Annual Performance Report and Self-Assessment 2023-24

Annual Report of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board 2023-24

Annual Report of the Director of Social Services 2024-25

Participation Strategy 2023

Fforddd Gwynedd Plan 2023-28

Corporate Risk Register

Annual Workshop with the Regulators and Cabinet Members

Performance Reports of individual Cabinet Members

Statement of the Accounts 2024-25

Cyngor Gwynedd's Assets Plan 2019/20 - 2028/29

Audit Wales Annual Audit Summary 2024

Cyngor Gwynedd's Constitution

Staff surveys

Surveys of residents

Annual Report Cyngor Gwynedd Standards Committee 2024-25

Final Accounts 2024/25 – Revenue Out-turn

Annual Report of the Head of Internal Audit 2024-25

Reports by Audit Wales

Reports by Care Inspectorate Wales

Reports by Estyn

2024/2025 Governance Statement

Cyngor Gwynedd's Annual Equality Performance Report 2024-25