Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 - Cyngor Gwynedd's Self-assessment 2023/24

Background and Introduction

This is the third self-assessment conducted by Cyngor Gwynedd under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

The Act requires each Council in Wales to keep under review the extent to which it is meeting the 'performance requirements', namely 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.

The intention of the self-assessment process is to encourage honesty, objectivity and transparency about the Council's performance and governance, including its key relationships between political leaders and officers and the way they are managed. An effective approach would be owned and led at a strategic level, but would also involve members and officers at all levels of the organisation and a variety of people across communities and partners.

Although this duty is fairly new, it should be noted that the Council is already preparing a number of documents that contain the type of information 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 Department, Head of Corporate Support Department and the Head of Legal Services amongst others, has led/taken an overview of this process within the Council. In doing so, the intention is for the work to be owned and led on a strategic level.

In the past, our performance reporting arrangements have focused on the progress of projects under our improvement priorities together with the day-to-day work performance of Services and Departments within the Council. A copy of the Council's Annual Performance Report is available here on the Council's website.

This year, like the last, we have integrated the work with the Council's performance challenge arrangements including the self-assessment within the Annual Performance Report so that all information is within the same document.

This document is a high-level summary of a strategic self-assessment of the Council's performance during 2023/24 with results based on evidence from the documents listed above. Performance challenge and support meetings are held at a Departmental level every other month, looking at the progress of priority projects, service performance and the response to the main risks within the Corporate Risk Register. The information then informs the regular performance reports submitted by each Cabinet Member during the year together with an Annual Performance Report at the end of the financial year.

The document includes an assessment of our governance arrangements using the seven corporate areas that are common to the corporate governance arrangements of public bodies, as suggested within the statutory guidance of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, responding to the 3 performance requirements to which Councils are expected to respond 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 2022/23 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. It was seen that a number of those improvements continue in the 2022-23 assessment as they are long-term matters, however, a number of additional points were also reiterated. This year, we see the pattern continuing, with the long-term matters re-appearing but with new considerations also being added.

Performance Requirement One: The extent to which the Council operates its functions effectively.

How well are we doing?

Last year, the Council adopted a new Plan for 2023-28. This Plan leads our aspirations and priorities for the period. 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 in order to create a better area by 2035.

In order 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 acknowledge that we have room to improve in terms of the work to forward plan detailed work-flow over the period of the Council Plan 2023-28, and consequently, we have introduced a series of annual milestones to allow us to measure progress, as well as plan work for the future. Work to further improve this continues.

It is noted that the Council is involved in 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 currently varies 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 with the support of the Third Sector Liaison Group, we intend to look at this during 2023/24.

As set out in the last self-assessment our corporate plans are in line with statutory requirements/guidance or relevant legislation but there is scope to strengthen this link. In developing the Council's Plan for 2023-28, steps were put in place to address the specific statutory requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the five ways of working. However, we have little evidence that it has permeated as a fundamental element of direction setting and mainstreamed.

The Council's 'Climate and Nature Emergency Plan 2022/23 - 2029/30' sets an ambition which notes that "Cyngor Gwynedd will be net-zero carbon and ecologically positive by 2030". The Plan includes a broad range of projects to reduce carbon emissions and to absorb carbon across a number of areas: 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.

During 2023/24, £1,640,495 was invested to purchase a fleet of 67 electric vehicles, a lighting upgrade pilot scheme and heat pump scheme. It should be noted that this is a continuation of an annual pattern of trying to invest in carbon saving schemes that dates back to 2010. We will continue to consider where to invest our scarce funding in order to achieve the greatest benefit in terms of reducing our carbon emissions, and take full advantage of any opportunities to attract grants and funding.

Climate change is also a priority in the Council Plan for 2023-28, and progress against the project will be reported to the meetings of the Climate Change and Nature Board.

Work continues to ensure that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and other statutory requirements fully integrate within our corporate planning frameworks, instead of doing so in a reactive and fragmented 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.

To support this a new Impact Assessment will be introduced to ensure that attention is paid to issues such as Equality Characteristics, the Welsh language, Climate Change and Socio-Economic Impact. Unfortunately, we have encountered technical problems with the Impact Assessment which has led to a delay before its introduction, but we are in discussions with the app creators at the moment in an attempt to resolve this.

Cyngor Gwynedd is very keen to ensure that equality is deeply rooted within the Council's work to improve our services for all the people of Gwynedd. Consequently, a Strategic Equality Plan was developed for 2024-28 in order to give us a framework to improve fairness within the Council, and ensure that we treat people according to their needs.

An important part of this Equality Plan are the Equality Objectives. We have been asking for the public's opinion over a period of some months, including various groups and individuals, to see what are the best objectives that we can achieve for the people of Gwynedd. These Objectives are based on what we have been told, but also on a number of other factors. These include data from various sources, Welsh Government's action plans and what is possible within the Council.

A broad training programme was provided for Elected Members during 2023/24, which included core training in seven specific areas:

- Safe Leadership and Personal Safety
- Code of Conduct
- The Well-being of Future Generations Act
- Safeguarding Children and Adults
- Your Responsibility for Equality
- Your Responsibility as a Corporate Parent
- Information about People: Your Responsibility

In addition, training was being offered in many other fields as well as an opportunity for every Councillor to receive a personal development interview in order to identify specific developmental fields. There is an offer for councillors to have specific sessions before they undertake roles on different committees, e.g. Cabinet Members, training for all scrutiny members as part of the workshops before the members begin their scrutiny work, and a number of other committees such as Planning, Licensing and Governance and Audit.

In recent years efforts have been made to improve and strengthen the role of Scrutiny Members in Corporate Planning ensuring that the Scrutiny programme is linked to the realisation of the Council's Plan priorities and also holding Cabinet to account over performance. Consideration is given to the priorities of the Council Plan when determining the scrutiny programme for the year and since the new performance challenge and support procedure was introduced, representation from the Scrutiny Committees have been nominated to attend departmental performance meetings twice a year.

It is also noted that the Governance and Audit Committee has struggled to attract suitable lay and elected members to be on the committee as required within the Local Government and Elections Act 2021 which means we did not have the expected number of lay and elected members during the year. There is further recognition that the traditional method of advertising did not offer a sufficient number of suitable applicants to meet the requirements. We will continue to engage with professional bodies, etc., in order to identify suitable individuals.

A new performance challenge and support procedure has been implemented since the first cycle of performance challenge and support meetings in 2022/23. In line with the new system all Council Departments hold an internal performance challenge and support meeting every other month, and report to Cabinet twice a year. The internal meetings are an opportunity to challenge the progress of the Department's improvement priorities projects and service performance measures (that is, the day-to-day work). As the new arrangements have now had some time to embed, work is progressing to review our performance arrangements with the intention of making further adjustments, and as part of that, we will report to the Scrutiny Committee instead of the Cabinet from 2025/26 onwards.

In line with the requirement to consult on performance, we held many consultations and opinion surveys during the year, including looking at customer satisfaction. We are also preparing an annual report on complaints and are continuously adjusting our services when observations or complaints suggest improvements.

Last year, it was seen that the number of Formal Complaints increased with a slight reduction in the number of complaints to the Ombudsman. We are working to reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, and we are busy developing a new Customer Charter.

During May/June 2023 we undertook a consultation exercise with our Residents Panel, Town and Community Councils, Elected Members, Staff and Unions to establish their opinion on the Council's performance. The level of response was a little disappointing with only 221 respondents. However, several issues to act on were identified and steps have been taken to respond with many of them continuing as improvements outlined within this document.

We did not carry out a specific consultation on our performance when drawing up this document as we are looking at the most effective way of gathering the views of our population, and are considering the possibility of participating in a National Resident Survey led by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Data Cymru. Participating in this work would enable us to gather information regarding residents' opinions about our performance by also enabling us to look at trends over time and allow for an element of benchmarking our performance against other councils. If there is an agreement it is foreseen to carry out consultations regularly so that they contribute towards self-assessments in the future.

We are aware of the need to be cautious to avoid 'consultation fatigue' as we are already seeking the views of our residents on a number of various subjects and schemes, and consequently, a cross-departmental Engagement Group has now been established, which meets every 2-3 months to gather information about proposed consultations and to share results and good practice. This helps to ensure that there is sufficient time to plan consultations and avoid duplication.

After a period of public consultation on the content of the draft Participation Strategy, the results of the consultation as well as the Draft Strategy were submitted to the Cabinet before being presented to the full Council in March 2023, where it was adopted. This Strategy outlines Cyngor Gwynedd's aim of encouraging people to participate in the decision-making process. In it we explain how our objectives in terms of participation will make a genuine difference to the way we engage with people in Gwynedd. Within every objective, we have identified clear outcomes and actions.

How do we know that?

The evidence outlined above includes a reference to some of the highlights of issues where we perform well or not as well. There is further evidence and detail within the documents/sources at the end of this report.

To summarise, the Council acknowledges that we have room to improve in terms of forward planning the work-flow over the Council Plan period and as a result, a series of annual milestones have been set. We are going to continue to collaborate with a number of our partnerships and we are looking for evidence of how our corporate plans permeate as a basic element and set a direction.

During the year, a new template was introduced to plan reports to the Cabinet, which leads officers to highlight how different statutory requirements, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and Equalities Act 2010, are greeted when preparing their reports.

Elected members have received a broad training programme and there is an opportunity for every councillor to have a developmental interview and sessions to support them in specific roles. The role of scrutiny members has also been strengthened.

There is a new performance challenge and support procedure in place and an intention to report to the Scrutiny Committees instead of the Cabinet from 2025/26 onwards. We are also preparing an annual report on complaints, and are continuously adjusting our services when observations or complaints point to improvements.
We are looking at the most effective way of gathering the views of our population and considering the possibility of participating in a national survey organised by the WLGA and a Participation Strategy has been published which explains how we are encouraging local people to participate in the Council's decision-making processes.

What needs to be improved?

Additional improvements have been identified this year
• Improving 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.
• Participate in a national survey organised by the WLGA in order to obtain useful information by the county's residents on our performance. This will allow us to benchmark our performance and compare with other Authorities in Wales.

Improvement	
We will:	**Our progress to date**
Continue work to strengthen our internal arrangements to ensure that statutory requirements/guidance or legislation are a core element and better integrated with our corporate planning.	Since the summer of 2023 a template has been introduced where reports submitted to the Cabinet need to refer to how the content of the report reflects the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This arrangement has replaced the previous arrangements where the requirements were enforced through other governance processes. In addition, there is an expectation to report on the findings of any relevant assessments such as the Impact Assessment on Equality Characteristics, the Welsh Language and the Socio-Economic Impact. Over the coming months, it is intended to

	hold a session with the Leadership Team on the Future Generations Act which will be led by the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, as well as holding further training sessions for the rest of the members.
• Continue with work to communicate service performance and the Council as a whole more effectively to residents.	The Communication and Engagement Service, at the request of departments, sends statements on the Council's performance, e.g. a communication Plan was created around the Council's annual report which included a statement and series of social media messages; departmental progress on key projects, e.g. increase the housing stock available for local people, and develop a car charging network across the county. In addition, Council committee agendas and papers are published on the corporate website and a series of messages are being published on social media to highlight individual reports to the Cabinet. As noted above, the Communication and Engagement Service are reliant on individual Departments to bring relevant matters to their attention, and maybe this does not happen consistently across the organisation.
• 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 work fields, including press statements, items on our website, social media and the press. In addition, detailed responses are provided to enquiries from the press about the work of the Council and/or committee reports.
• Do work to ensure mutual understanding and ownership of the vision and priorities at different levels within the organisation.	Communication work taking place to raise awareness internally.

Performance Requirement Two: The extent to which the council uses its resources prudently, effectively and efficiently

How well are we doing?

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 capacity to achieve what is included in the Plan as it is developed, the financial situation has changed substantially since then, and if the financial squeeze continues, it could mean that the Council will need to adapt or reduce our vision and consequently the number of projects that we will be able to complete in full within the period.

There are many examples of good collaboration in partnership with external organisations across our services, including the care and education field, e.g. Estyn stated, " Gwynedd education department works closely and effectively with the north Wales regional school effectiveness and improvement service (GwE) to improve provision offered by the authority's schools.", in their report published in June 2023.

The Council has effective arrangements for financial planning and management to ensure service continuity. Internal auditors focus on effective arrangements and controls in financial systems, whilst the accountants work closely with the departments and encourage managers' ownership of their systems, performance and financial propriety.

The Finance Department, in close contact with the Chief Executive and Directors, undertakes ongoing reviews of the Council's financial forecasts over the next 3 years, updating the model regularly when new information is received 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 its Financial Strategy which ensures 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. Reviewing spending against budgets, and monitoring that savings have been achieved by all Council departments, ensures that the services operate efficiently. In September 2021, Audit Wales published a report confirming that the Council's financial management is good. The report can be found here. The report can be seen on the Audit Wales website. Audit Wales is conducting a similar review again in 2024 as a part of a national review of the 22 unitary authorities. Interviews were held during May 2024 and it is expected that the reports of Audit Wales on the outcome of their work (with local reports to the councils and one report to provide the national picture) will be published during Autumn 2024.

A new savings programme was introduced as one of the Council's main priorities when responding to the latest financial situation, and the Council agreed to a savings programme to the value of £6.4 million when setting the budget for 2023/24, and further savings of £5.2 million when setting the 2024/25 budget. In addition, in May 2024, the Cabinet approved a 'Medium Term Financial Plan' for Cyngor Gwynedd up to the 2027/28 financial year. As a part of this Plan, the Chief Executive was asked to establish and lead on a range of measures and work packages in preparation to address the substantial gap in the Council's budget over the next three years.

The Council also needs to give further consideration to how it can involve residents in significant financial decisions. In the past the Council has consulted on its plans to achieve savings sporadically, for example, through the Her Gwynedd exercise in 2016 and the Financial Strategy consultation in 2019.

It also holds workshops with Members on the Council tax level and engages on Non-domestic Rates on an annual basis. The Council recognises the need to be more open about financial decisions and engage more frequently, or ensure that the people of Gwynedd have an input on decisions. The Cabinet approved the Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 - 2027/28 on 14 May 2024, however, this was only the beginning of the journey. The Plan has identified a substantial gap in the Council's budget over the next three years and the Council has committed to leave no stone unturned when filling this deficit as a matter of urgency. The Council will consider a number of steps, therefore, and we will include Gwynedd residents in the discussions as appropriate when implementing steps to fill the deficit.

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.

Measuring value for money is an area currently being addressed, with a view to develop an efficient framework for measuring value for money within our performance challenge and support regime. It is subject to a working group of officers chaired by the Chief Executive. As this work develops, we have engaged with external experts (e.g. CIPFA) to support us with this task.

As a Council, we will take advantage of opportunities to innovate and embed digital technology to improve our residents' lives, to collaborate better with partners, and strengthen and improve the accountability of our services to meet the needs and expectations of our customers. To assist us with this, Cyngor Gwynedd's new Digital Plan for 2023-28 was approved during the year.

Recent years have seen increasing challenges in staff recruitment in a number of key work areas such as social care and education. This field is already a priority for the Council and the 'Workforce Planning' project has been included in the Council Plan for 2023-28. It is also noted that the Governance and Audit Committee suggested that consideration should be given to workforce planning, succession planning and managerial progression as potential

fields for the Performance Assessment Panel (which will be held during October 2024) to consider.

The main aim of the Workforce Planning project is to ensure that the Council has an adequate supply of competent staff to enable it to provide services for the county's residents, and that we are able to ensure that this supply is in place for the long-term.

The Apprenticeship Scheme has given opportunities to 56 apprentices since 2019 (which is one of the highest numbers in Wales compared to the population and size of other Councils). There are also examples of the success of the Scheme, with individuals who have embarked on the Apprenticeship Scheme receiving promotions and permanent posts within the Council. Similarly the Graduate Scheme (Cynllun Yfory) has given 32 professional trainees opportunities since 2017 with a number of them being offered a position with the Council.

As part of the 'Women in Leadership' priority project, a specific Development Plan was established for women, as they have been identified as a cohort that is reluctant to apply for higher positions. This scheme continues as a priority in the Council Plan 2023-28.

While the workforce planning project brings several departments together to collaborate and tackle the problems of attracting and retaining staff, the Council tends to be responsive in nature rather than planning for the long-term. One weakness of Management (for the most part) is the failure to look forward 5-10 years taking into account the age of current staff and the expertise needed in the future, which has the potential to have a significant impact on the continuity of service.

The results of this year's Voice of the Staff Survey reflects the challenging period encountered over the past two years as we entered the post-pandemic period, at the same time as financial cuts, and a transitional period in terms of establishing our future working arrangements. To reflect this, a reduction was seen in the score for the statement 'the Council is a good place to work' in comparison with the results of the previous survey. There were four parts to the survey this year, and in general, across the Council, the score for the statements in the categories 'my post' and 'my service' were higher than the score for the statements 'my employer' and 'my well-being'. This is a reflection that teams have been working more in isolation over the pandemic period and that the same opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration did not arise. There is robust evidence of some of the main Ffordd Gwynedd principles embedding some of the most positive responses, e.g. 'I understand the contribution made by my service when serving the people of Gwynedd', whilst previous themes regarding being appreciated and receiving acknowledgement continue to be points for improvement.

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 there are Three Categories

(Environment, Corporate and People) responsible for purchasing in specific fields, looking at procurement strategically and putting more emphasis on collaboration, conducting a thorough analysis of the market in an attempt to ensure that we obtain 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.

A project has reached a conclusion in 2023/24 to assess the feasibility of introducing a social benefits assessment methodology for Gwynedd, i.e. sharing the method of assessing tenders currently being undertaken by measuring Price and Quality to one that measures Local Price, Quality and Value. As part of the project, three further pilots were completed during the year using the social benefits-based tender assessment method. The three schemes have created over £100k in social benefits for the residents of Gwynedd.

During 2023/24, we will also be developing measures for the County's catering contract, it will be expected to report on the social, economic and environmental impact during 2024/25 as a result of including these measures.

Ongoing work is being undertaken to support businesses to respond to the tender requirements as a result of any developments in the field, such as gaining accreditations or responding to the requirements of the Well-being Act. Recently, we have been working with the supply chain to assess the environmental impact and attempting to reduce the carbon footprint.

The Council has a process to manage risks by having a Corporate Risk Register in place. In addition, arrangements for Internal Audit also exist and an annual workshop on assurance and risks is held with external auditors (Audit Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn).

In order to ensure that arrangements are in place to respond to any recommendations from audit bodies, consideration is given to quarterly update reports from Audit Wales at the meetings of the Governance and Audit Committee. Also, there are appropriate arrangements in place to respond to any reports from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Note that 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.

A revamped Corporate Risk Register was launched in March 2021 and the system has proven to be a user-friendly facility in all Departments. It is now much easier to make a link between the risks as Departments consider their priorities and identify what needs to be

done as a response, and it also assists Members to challenge performance and ensure that the expected steps have been taken to reduce the risk.

We are aware that there is a need to continue reviewing the procedure of identifying and scoring risks, particularly in order to ensure consistency across the organisation in terms of the assessment and scoring process. In addition, we are going to review the extent to which specific measures 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 which takes into account any mitigation, as well as the existing risk score (as a result of *impact x likelihood* only).

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 as referred to above and the Governance and Audit Committee 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. The lessons that have been learnt when dealing with the Covid-19 crisis has been valuable in subsequent emergencies, e.g. the Ukraine war.

While the future risk management regime and strategies are generally improving and strengthening, the Governance and Audit Committee needs to satisfy itself that arrangements are in place to deal with risks in an appropriate manner and this work has been included in the Committee's forward work programme.

Based on Internal Audit work completed during 2023/2024, which will be noted in the Audit Manager's Annual Report, it was considered that Cyngor Gwynedd's internal control framework during that financial year was deemed to operate at a reasonable level of assurance on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Authority's governance, risk management and internal control framework.

As a part of the 2023-28 Council Plan, we will adopt a new Property Assets Management Plan to ensure that our estate is fit for purpose for working in the future. This work has already commenced and it will ensure that our Property Assets are fit for purpose and cost effective, particularly following the changes made to working patterns and service delivery over the past years.

In terms of Council vehicles, a plan is in progress to make better use of the fleet, which has already led to some financial savings and is likely to achieve more in the future. The increased use of electric vehicles will also contribute towards reducing the Council's carbon emissions.

How do we know that?

The evidence outlined above includes a reference to some of the highlights of issues where we perform well or not as well. There is further evidence and detail within the documents/sources at the end of this report:

To summarise, the 2023-28 Council Plan is ambitious and in light of the challenging budgetary climate, consideration will be given to the capacity to deliver what is included in the Plan. The Council is collaborating with external organisations across our services and this is essential to ensure efficiency. The Council has effective arrangements to plan and manage money, with the Finance Department in close contact with the Chief Executive and Directors to carry out ongoing reviews of the financial projections. Annually, the Council prepares a Financial Strategy to secure a balance budget to ensure service continuity and publishes a Statement of Accounts at the end of every financial year. Work has been done to address the gap in the Council's budget over the next three years. The Council acknowledges that consideration needs to be given to how residents can be included in financial decisions in the future.

Annually, the Head of Finance carries out a self-assessment of compliance with the CIPFA Code of Financial Management and work is in progress to develop an efficient framework to measure value for money within our performance challenge and support arrangements.

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.

The Council has a process to manage risks through its Corporate Risk Register and Internal Audit arrangements also exist.

What needs to be improved?

Additional improvements have been identified this year
• **Review the procedure of identifying and scoring risks, particularly to ensure consistency across the organisation in terms of the assessment and scoring process.**

Improvement	
We will:	**Our progress to date**
• Look to the future in order to anticipate the Council's long-term financial position by preparing a Medium-Term Financial Strategy.	• The Cabinet approved the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 - 2027/28 on 14 May 2024.
• Consider the most suitable ways to engage and involve residents in significant financial decisions and implementation (preparing the 2024/25 budget)	• A series of press releases have already been shared to explain the financial context, and more will be released over the coming months.
• Continue work to review the Council's Assets Plan to ensure priorities remain current in light of the experiences and developments of recent years.	• Drawing up a new Assets Management Plan is a project in the Council Plan for 2023-28. • Some discussions and initial steps have already been taken and the next steps will include holding initial discussions with Council departments to identify whether their property assets are fit for purpose, and ensure that the Cabinet's authority to the Property Management Policies has been adjusted. • When the Corporate Property Management Strategy is approved, it will be possible to proceed to prepare a Property Assets Action Plan (the timetable of which will be subject to the Corporate Strategy).
• Looking to develop a way of measuring 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 it will continue in 2024/25.
• Continue to implement a project to address the current staff recruitment problems the Council is experiencing.	• The 'Workforce Planning' Project, which is a part of the Council Plan for 2023-28, is addressing this. • A number of initial steps have already been taken in line with the milestones

	for year 1 of the Project. The next steps will include the establishment of detailed work programmes for a series of up to seven sub-projects which contribute to the full project.
• Continue to provide guidance and advice to services to establish long-term workforce planning practices, so that future recruitment and retention problems can be avoided.	• See above

Performance Requirement Three: The extent to which the Council has effective governance arrangements in practice to ensure performance requirements one and two.

How well are we doing?

The Council generally has a suitable governance system in place. The Council's Constitution is a public document which sets out the governance arrangements, and a Guidance to the Constitution is provided to reinforce this. The Governance Arrangements Assessment Group retains 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.

In addition, 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.

In April 2024, a workshop of members from the Governance and Audit Committee was held to conduct a self-assessment of the committee's efficiency. The work programme deriving from this assessment was approved by the Committee, with the aim of further improving its way of working, and the matters it addresses.

Audit Wales conducted a 'Review of scrutiny effectiveness' during 2022/23 and the report was published in September 2023. The report received is encouraging, recognizing the changes that have been made over the past few years in order to strengthen our scrutiny arrangements and give scrutiny a higher status in Gwynedd. It was found that the Council had reviewed and introduced changes to overview and scrutiny arrangements, and that there was a higher status to scrutiny within the democratic process. Nevertheless, there are opportunities to further strengthen the contribution, status and impact of scrutiny. This includes recommendations such as training for elected members, strengthening the alignment between the annual scrutiny work programme and the Cabinet's work programme and the Council Plan and that formal arrangements is needed on tracking the impact of scrutiny. In response our scrutiny arrangements were reviewed and at the Full Council Meeting on 7 March 2024 they adopted an option to keep the current scrutiny committee arrangements and approved the actions to improve efficiency in response to the recommendations of the Wales Audit report.

The roles of Council, Cabinet, Individual Members and Chief Officers, together with a clear delegation plan, are set out in the Council Constitution. Cyngor Gwynedd has also prioritised the development of its Leadership Programme and that is part of the People's Plan adopted by the Cabinet. Cyngor Gwynedd has also prioritised the development of its Leadership Programme and this is a part of the People Plan adopted by the Cabinet.

The Council has a positive organisational culture which has been supported by "Ffordd Gwynedd" which is the name given to the "way of working" which we have adopted in order

to put the people of Gwynedd at the centre of everything we do. Changing culture, behaviours and mindsets is at the heart of all this and the aim of realising the ambition across all parts of Council activity is a significant challenge and one that requires a comprehensive programme of support.

Progress has been made on the broadest part of the nine work-streams that make up the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan 2023-28. In brief, this is the most marked progress in the first year of the current Plan:

Leadership - The latest departmental self-assessments (March/April 2024) are very positive in terms of the shift to 'lead' instead of 'managing'. Every Department, without exception, acknowledges that this is the aim and practice by the majority of managers but there is acknowledgement that this change has not been embedded as well in every service. In this respect, the need for further training is being considered as part of the further shift to ensure that leading is the norm and expectation when someone joins the Council.

The Cabinet members have continued to invest their time in personal development and as a team during the past year, with a clear intention to build further on this development during 2024/25. The Corporate Management Team has held three whole day sessions during the year in order to develop as a team of leaders in the Council (and the Corporate Management Team is now operating as a Ffordd Gwynedd Lead Group, and has committed as a team to promote the culture and develop the organisation in line with the principles of this way of working).

Furthermore, a series of developmental programmes has been published for the development of managers, senior managers and prospective managers across the Council, e.g. Manager Development Programme, Senior Leadership Development Programme. Details were shared about these programmes during the Autumn series of the Managers Network (Team Leaders now also receive an invitation) and the first cohort have already commenced the Manager Development Programme earlier on during 2024.

One gap was identified in the opportunities to develop prospective senior managers in the future during the year, namely among the cohort of assistant heads across the Council's departments. In response, the Assistant Heads Forum was established as an initial step with a view to offer further opportunities for those individuals by means of the Senior Leadership Programme in the future.

Learn, Experiment and Act to Improve - A Practitioners' Group was established to share best practice as well as lessons learnt, with a register of reviews being maintained. The number of reviews held during the year was increased, with some of them already leading to an improved service, e.g. Tax Office's provision of advice over the phone has been re-established between 9am-5pm Monday to Friday since 11 September 2023. Furthermore, in order to improve the understanding of Cabinet Members of what derives from holding reviews, an arrangement was introduced where officers who lead on individual reviews

attend the meetings of the Leadership Team during the year to share experiences, successes and lessons learnt.

Digital Transformation - the corporate Digital Plan for 2023-38 was approved by the Cabinet on 7 November. 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 already been secured to steer the work programme of the first two years of the Digital Plan with one of the main priorities, namely ensuring a new integrated phone system, to be realised during 2024/25.

There are promising developments in each of the other work streams but the work stream of disseminating the practice of "continuous appraisal" across the Council was identified as the main focus for the year to come. The leadership and support for doing this has been drawn up and there will be a need to launch and promote this over the first months of the second year of the current Plan.

The latest departmental self-evaluations identify matters such as formalising the practice of conducting ongoing appraisals and ensuring better collaboration about issues such as performance within teams and noting the need to offer follow-up to training for managers in the context of conducting reviews of systems and processes and developing the culture within teams. This feedback as well as the response received to the latest annual Voice of Staff Survey will direct what will be prioritised during the year to come. It is anticipated that the annual report, which will incorporate and detail all of this, will probably be submitted to the Cabinet in September.

In terms of the Council's internal activity, we have good engagement and communication arrangements in place with important messages being shared with staff in various ways. Similarly, it is important to gather the views of staff and that they have an opportunity to provide feedback on the kind of employer the organisation is. To this end, Voice of Staff Questionnaires have been in regular circulation asking about areas related to their job, service and also the Council as an organisation. The results are shared with the Heads of Services, so that they have an opportunity to respond to the main messages or any specific challenge, as well as the whole workforce via the intranet, the weekly bulletin and staff self-service. In addition to the corporate survey, some departments have undertaken further work to ascertain the views of staff on a regular basis.

We have effective arrangements to monitor the budget with the Finance Department employing officers with suitable skills, knowledge and experience in order to undertake this duty. A formal review of the situation with the revenue expenditure will be held at the end of August and November and the results will be reported to the Governance and Audit Committee and to the Cabinet for approval. An update on the capital programme will also be presented at the same meetings.

The Council's Treasury Management arrangements have been in place for several years, and are under the supervision of independent teams within the Finance Department. Treasury Management activities are reported to the Governance Committee twice a year in June and

November. Treasury Management activity will be reported to the Governance and Audit Committee on a quarterly basis.

The debate on whether overspending is due to failure to control spending, or due to an inadequate budget is an ongoing one. Work to review provisions in budgets will continue over the next year in the preparation for the 2025/26 budget.

There is a very constructive relationship between the Council and its Governance and Audit Committee, and the internal and external auditors. This can be seen from the minutes of the Committee meeting, and the committee's Annual Report also highlights this.

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.

The improvements identified within the self-assessment will be addressed by specific Departments within the Council and will report back on progress to the relevant performance challenge and support meeting.

How do we know that?

The evidence outlined above includes a reference to some of the highlights of issues where we perform well or not as well. There is further evidence and detail within the documents/sources at the end of this report:

To summarise, the Council's Constitution is a public document which sets out governance arrangements and the Governance Arrangements Assessment Group keeps an overview of governance matters within the Council. The Council also publishes an annual Governance Statement which outlines our arrangements. Audit Wales carried out a review of our scrutiny efficiency and work is already being done to address a number of recommendations and others are ongoing work. The work coincides with the review of scrutiny arrangements.
The Council has a positive organisational culture by means of the Ffordd Gwynedd principle and progress has been made with the vast majority of the nine work-streams that make up the plan. Internal engagement and communication activity is good and important messages are being shared with all staff. Also, there are effective arrangements to monitor the budget with the Council's Treasury Management arrangements that has been established for many years.

What needs to be improved?

Additional improvements have been identified this year
• **Complete the actions to improve the efficiency of scrutiny in response to the recommendations of the Wales Audit report.**

Improvement	
We will:	**Our progress to date**
• 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.	• Staff Voice Survey held in September / October 2023 and detailed interpretation work has been carried out. • By now, the main findings have been shared with members of the Corporate Management Team, and are also in the process of being submitted to the management teams of every Department individually. The corporate work plan to implement 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 conducted a self-assessment in April 2024 and we will draw-up a work programme as a result of this assessment.
• Continue to act on the steps already put in place in response to an audit of performance challenge arrangements undertaken by Audit Wales during 2021/22 and continue to look at the success of those arrangements reviewing if necessary.	• Have been acting on current performance challenge and support arrangements since April 2022 (which includes steps put in place to respond to recommendations made by Audit Wales during 2021/22). • Over the past year, further reviews have been held by Audit Wales relating to scrutiny arrangements and use of information on performance and we are currently in the process of reviewing the arrangements with the intention of ensuring that members of the Scrutiny Committee play a more central role.
• Implement the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan Work Programme 2023-28 to continue to improve performance and provide the best possible	• Formal reviews are taking place or have been completed in many services, and these examples of

services for the County's residents.	good practice have been collated in a register. On 25 January 2024, the first meeting of the Ffordd Gwynedd Practitioners' Group was held to share and record experiences learnt when conducting service reviews or when implementing the Ffordd Gwynedd principles. • Draft packages of Ffordd Gwynedd training have been developed, with the intention of launching them during 2024. This includes a document on Ffordd Gwynedd behaviours for the purposes of ongoing evaluation. Here, the progress with the leadership sub-stream also applies: the Corporate Management Team has completed three team development sessions since November 2023; the Assistant Heads Forum was established last year, and; the first Manager Development Programme will run this year, as well as the Senior Leadership Development Programme from the Spring onwards. • Some of the sub-streams of the Ffordd Gwynedd Plan circulate around broader strategy planning in the Council. E.g. the digital sub-stream has made considerable progress since adopting the Digital Plan last year; similarly the workforce planning and talent development sub-stream due to the new Workforce Planning Plan. • In terms of the satisfied and healthy workforce sub-stream, one important aspect is ensuring the Absences Group continue to target intervention where there are high levels of sickness.

Useful Appendices

Cyngor Gwynedd's Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24

Cyngor Gwynedd's Diversity Statement

Cyngor Gwynedd's Annual Equality Performance Report 2022-23

Cyngor Gwynedd's Annual Performance Report and Self-Assessment 2022-23

2021/2022 Governance Statement

Annual Report of the Head of Internal Audit 2023-24

Annual Report of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board 2022-23

Annual Report of the Director of Social Services 2023-24

Participation Strategy 2023

Ffordd Gwynedd Plan 2023-28

Corporate Risk Register

Annual Workshop with the Regulators and Cabinet Members

Performance Reports of individual Cabinet Members

Annual Report on the Children and Supporting Families Department and the Adults, Health and Well-being Department's Complaints, Enquiries and Expressions of Gratitude Procedure for 2022-23

Sustainable Procurement Policy and Guidance

Employment Information 2022-23

Statement of the Accounts 2022-23

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

2021/2022 Governance Statement

Audit Wales Annual Audit Summary 2023

Annual Report Cyngor Gwynedd Standards Committee 2023-24

Final Accounts 2023/24 – Revenue Out-turn

People Plan Strategy

Audit Wales Springing Forward Report 2021-2022

Cyngor Gwynedd - Financial Sustainability Assessment (audit.wales)

Internal Audit Updates reporting to the Governance and Audit Committee all year)

Cyngor Gwynedd's Constitution

Treasury Management Reports -

SeptemberSeptember 2023 (end 2022/23) 2023 (end 2022/23) -

December 2023 - Mid Year Treasury Management Report 2023-24.pdf (llyw.cymru)

IIP Assessment - Corporate Support Department and Gwynedd Consultancy

Staff Surveys

Review of the effectiveness of scrutiny - Cyngor Gwynedd (audit.wales)