RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RCT Council

Panel Performance Assessment

1.0 Introduction and Background

1.1 In accordance with the performance duties under the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021, Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Rhondda Cynon Taf, Rhondda Cynon Taff Council – (the Council) commissioned a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

1.2 The onsite assessment was completed over a four-day period commencing the 7th October and concluding 10th October 2025 with a feedback presentation provided to the Council outlining the key findings detailed within this report.

1.3 The assessment was undertaken based on the Council's agreed scoping document, agreed terms of reference and the WLGA's PPA methodology, which was developed with the sector. The WLGA PPA methodology provides an overarching framework: the lines of enquiry are not prescriptive but provide guidance to the panel on the areas that could be explored to meet the statutory duty. However, the extent to which the panel explores those areas should be proportionate to the Council's scope but sufficient to enable the panel to form a conclusion.

1.4 In accordance with the statutory guidance the PPA is not an audit or an inspection and does not seek to duplicate work undertaken by regulators and other bodies. Whilst the panel has undertaken a corporate assessment, this assessment was not in-depth and should be considered alongside other sources of assurance such as the Council's own self-assessment, internal audit reviews, external audit and regulatory reviews.

1.5 In preparing for the PPA, the Council scoped their requirements to maximise the value and impact of the assessment to the Council. The specific areas of focus identified by the Council are reflected in paragraph 3.2.

1.6 This report provides a summary overview of the conclusions of the panel reported by exception.

2.0 Panel

2.1 The following peers were commissioned by the WLGA to undertake the assessment. Selection of the peers was agreed by, and at the discretion of the Council, based on suitability of skills and experience:

- Independent Chair: Karen Jones former Chief Executive Officer at Neath Port Talbot Council and independent consultant.

- Senior Member Peer: Councillor Mary Ann Brocklesby, Leader Monmouthshire County Council

- Senior Officer Peer: Jake Morgan, Chief Executive Officer at Bridgend County Borough Council

- Wider Public, Private, or Voluntary Sector Peer: Nicola Steuer, Deputy Chief Executive Officer at Powertochange.org.uk

2.2 The panel were supported by Lyndon Puddy (PPA Manager) and Emily Griffiths, Senior Support Officer from the WLGA's Improvement Team.

3.0 Scope and Approach

3.1 The panel were required to assess the extent to which the Council:

- Is exercising its functions effectively.
- Is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and
- Has effective governance in place for securing the above.

3.2 The Council identified the following areas where peer insight would be valued as part of the assessment in the following areas:

- **Demonstrating impact and outcomes for our communities**

- **Building Community Resilience**

3.3 In undertaking the assessment the panel conducted a desktop review of Council's documents, data, external reports and other relevant intelligence. The onsite stage of the review involved a series of individual meetings and focus groups with the following stakeholders:

- Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader, and Executive Cabinet Members
- Leaders of the Opposition
- Chairs of Scrutiny Committees
- Chief Executive Officer and Senior Leadership Team
- Directors, Heads of Service and other key Officers of the Council
- Opposition Members
- A range of elected Members (note all were invited to meet the panel)
- Staff
- Trades Unions
- Local businesses
- Public Services Board (PSB)
- Trivallis Housing Association
- Cwm Taf Morgannwg Health Board
- Voluntary Sector
- Leader and CEO of Merthyr CBC
- Chair/Vice Chair: Governance & Audit Committee
- Citizen Panel (Residents)
- Neighbourhood Networks
- Youth Groups and Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG)
- CEO Cardiff City Region

- Members of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Partnership Board (RPB)

4.0 Local Context

4.1 Rhondda Cynon Taf is situated within the South Wales valleys covering 424 square kilometres, stretching from the Beacon Beacons National Park in the north to the Capital City of Cardiff in the south. The Council has borders with Merthyr, Powys, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Neath Port Talbot, Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Council areas. The residential area of RCT was primarily developed in response to the discovery and mining of Welsh coal and porcelain production in the 19th century, which has marked the area with a rich industrial, social, and cultural heritage (RCT scope). It consists of five valleys: the Rhondda Fawr, Rhondda Fach, Cynon, Taff and Ely valleys, plus areas away from the valleys.

4.2 The Council is the third largest Local Authority in Wales, with an estimated population of 241,178 residents (Stats Wales 2023) and 103,300 Households (Census 2021) who make up diverse communities with different needs and aspirations. The age demographics of the area include a median age of 41 years (Census 2021), and a growing ageing population, with 19.9% of residents aged 65 and over (Stats Wales 2023). The Council has the second largest population of children aged 0-15 across all local authorities in Wales (Stats Wales 2023).

4.3 In the 2021 Census, 12.4% of RCT residents reported being able to speak Welsh (RCT scoping document). Although below the Wales average (17.8%), RCT was one of the few authorities to show an increase in Welsh speakers since the previous Census, reflecting the strong commitment to the Welsh language promotion strategy and Welsh in Education Strategic Plan in RCT.

4.4 The County does have some of the most deprived demographics in Wales. In 2019, RCT had a relatively high deprivation rate of 32% and had the second highest number of young children living in these circumstances when compared with other local authorities (RCT scoping document). This contributes to the continued high demand and increasing complexity for Children's Services and further pressures across the social care service; the Council contextualises some of the reasons for the experience of vulnerable families to the long-term impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis.

4.5 Residents in RCT are on average in poorer health than across Wales, possibly related to the industrial past of the area. 76% of all residents describe their health as "very good" or "good", 15.7% as "fair", and 8.3% as "bad" or "very bad" (Census 2021). In 2021, life expectancy in the Council area was 77.0 years for males and 80.5 years for females, but healthy life expectancy only 57.1 and 60.7 years respectively, below the Welsh average.

4.6 Across the County Borough 66.2% of the employed workforce is in full-time employment which exceeds the Welsh average (ONS 2022). This can partly be attributed to the industrial mix of the local area and specifically the manufacturing industry, which accounts for 13.8% of all jobs (ONS 2022). However, the public sector is by far the largest employer in the area with 33.7% of service industry jobs in public administration, health, and education (ONS 2022).

4.7 RCT is home to 6,835 active businesses and 169 social enterprises which play a vital role in supporting the local economy (ONS 2023). The Council has a strong track

record of supporting development and business growth including through the successful delivery of regeneration strategies and placemaking plans and administering grant funding. RCT has a high business birth rate (11.8% compared to 10.3% in Wales), however the business rate of closure has also increased in recent years to above the Wales average.

4.8 The Council has a strong track record of capital investment, and this is set to continue. This has included the delivery of significant investment in school buildings as part of the Welsh Government Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme, development of extra care facilities, as well as investment in road schemes, an ongoing programme of maintenance for structures and investment in flood alleviation works to combat the growing impact of adverse weather conditions on local communities.

4.9 Across RCT there is a wide range of community facilities and infrastructure for residents to use. The Council has a strong tourism offer and operates the Welsh Coal mining experience at the Heritage Park and The National Lido of Wales and is a partner in the Valleys Regional Park, with gateway sites at Dare Valley Country Park and Ynysangharad Park. In addition, local attractions including Zip World and the Royal Mint are closely engaged in the RCT Tourism Strategy.

5.0 Political Organisation

5.1 The County is split into 46 wards and has 75 Councillors. The Council has a Labour Party group majority.

Labour Party	58
Plaid Cymru – The party of Wales	8
Independent	6
Welsh Conservative Party	2
Labour and Cooperative Party	1

5.2 The Leader of the Council is Councillor Andrew Morgan OBE. The Deputy Leader is Councillor Maureen Webber BEM.

5.3 The second largest political Group is Plaid Cymru and Councillor Karen Morgan is the appointed Leader of the Opposition.

5.4 The Council's Cabinet is made up of 8 Councillors, including the Leader and Deputy Leader.

6.0 Corporate Organisation

6.1 The Council's Chief Executive is Paul Mee and has been permanently in post since November 2022.

6.2 The Chief Executive leads a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of ten executives who each have responsibility for a Council directorate (below). Each Directorate is supported through a Heads of Service senior manager structure.

- Barrie Davies - Deputy Chief Executive/Group Director – Finance, Digital & Frontline Services

- Stephen Williams - Director, Highways Streetcare, and Transportation Services.

- Christian Hanagan - Service Director, Democratic Services and Communications

- Richard Evans - Director of Human Resources

- Louise Davies - Director of Public Health, Protection & Community Services

- David Powell - Director of Corporate Estates

- Simon Gale - Director of Prosperity and Development

- Gaynor Davies - Director of Education and Inclusion Services

- Andy Wilkins - Director of Legal & Democratic Services

- Neil Elliott - Director of Social Services

6.3 In April 2024, the Council agreed its new Corporate Plan for 2024-30 which further embeds Climate Change into the work of the Council through its four new Well-being Objectives of People & Communities, Work & Business, Nature & The Environment and Culture, Heritage & Welsh Language. The Council has structured its Corporate Plan taking account of the Well Being of Future Generations Act and the five ways of working.

6.4 **The Council's vision is**:

'All people, communities and businesses can grow in a healthy, green, safe, vibrant, and inclusive County Borough where they can achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives and work, both now and into the future'.

6.5 The Council define their new wellbeing objectives as:

- **People & Communities –** Supporting and empowering RCT residents and communities to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

- **Work & Business –** Helping to strengthen and grow RCT's economy.

- **Nature & The Environment –** A green and clean RCT that improves and protects RCT's environment and nature

- **Culture, Heritage & Welsh Language –** Recognising and celebrating RCT's past, present and future.

6.6 Within the Corporate Plan the Council states its approach as being

''Our new plan builds on the strong platform put in place by our two previous plans. To deliver what our new plan sets out, we need our staff, Councillors, residents, communities and partners working in the same direction to deliver our shared vision. The future challenges faced across the Council's services mean that now more than ever, we need well trained, informed and supported staff and Councillors who can respond to the challenges ahead within an ambitious programme of work. As public sector budgets remain under pressure and the demands of our services increase, the need to work with communities and across organisational boundaries to deliver the best outcomes for our residents, both now and in the future has never been greater''

The approach is underpinned by the Council's stated **Values** as:

'We take pride in our work and set ourselves high standards and ambitions to deliver and have a positive impact for all in Rhondda Cynon Taf'

7.0 National and Local Challenges

7.1 Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council delivered a balanced financial position for 2024/25. Pressures in Adult and Children's Services remain the most substantial risks to financial stability, reflecting the wider national challenges in social care demand and costs across Wales as a whole. Schools have been prioritised, with full funding of identified pressures and an additional £11.2M allocation.

7.2 The Council has diverse communities and has some of the most deprived communities across Wales. This is an area of concern for the Council, and its ambition is to strengthen community resilience to further support independence. RCT has similar issues as other parts of Wales, with higher demand on services given that typically, incomes are lower, and families are still impacted following the pandemic and ongoing cost of living crisis.

7.3 The panel noted that residents in RCT are on average in poorer health than other non-industrial areas across Wales. 'Valley communities,' with their high producing industrial past, have areas where communities are described as deprived, with poor health and

life expectancy outcomes. This manifests as pressure on demand led services such as social services. The Council is responding and in its new corporate plan, the Council places an emphasis on strengthening community resilience, alongside other development work to better understand impact and outcomes. This approach has the potential to be transformative, helping to better target services, supported through evidence such as that generated via the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC).

8.0 Strengths and Areas of Innovation

8.1 **Mature political and officer leadership –** The panel identified RCT as a Council that has mature political and professional leadership with relationships based on mutual respect and focused on improving the lives of citizens living in the area. The Leader oversees an established Cabinet who demonstrate a clear grasp of their portfolios. The panel heard that the political leadership takes an inclusive approach where all members of Council are encouraged to participate. The panel heard '**The Leader has built a formidable reputation for standing up for RCT residents, effecting change and is linked into communities and is accessible'.** The political leadership has a strong, collaborative relationship with the Senior Leadership Team led by the Chief Executive. It was evident to the panel that all members of the SLT have 'corporate ownership' of the Council's priorities. The panel found the SLT, professional, knowledgeable and mutually supportive, creating an environment which places a focus on delivery but also encourages innovation.

8.2 **'Team RCT'** – The panel heard from both internal and external stakeholders that collaboration and a 'Team RCT' approach is embedded in the Council's culture. This was triangulated through a range of meetings with different stakeholders. The panel also heard from stakeholders across the political spectrum – locally and regionally – that they feel included in the work of the Council.

An example given included the Council's response to emergencies where Members and Officers effectively supported each other in response to pressures and emergencies. Both Executive and Non-Executive members spoke of the **''One Council approach''** that had served them well and commented on the way every department and elected member worked together to support the response. A further quote from the SLT captures this in that **''There is a strong sense of place here in RCT – a feeling of belonging where we want to do the best for everyone''**.

8.3 **Planning and Performance Framework** - The Council has a mature planning and performance framework that has been embedded across the Council. The Chief Executive takes a lead role in the application of the framework, annually chairing performance challenge meetings with each of the Chief Officers. This framework is viewed as a positive driver of change by the Service Heads. Chief Officers commented that whilst the investment of time in preparing 'challenge sessions' is high, the benefits of the time spent with the Chief Executive is welcomed and enables all departments of the Council to align with Council priorities.

The panel found that the planning and performance framework enables the Council to know itself well and to have a clear understanding of its future opportunities and challenges. The planning and performance framework has recently been further

developed to respond to recommendations made by Audit Wales and the panel saw evidence of the Council improving its understanding of the 'impact and expected outcome' of the work it does.

The panel also saw evidence of corresponding changes being made to the way the Council communicates its work to the public, but the Council acknowledges there is more to do to help people understand the Council's role and to engage citizens in policy and service change.

Consequently, the Council can demonstrate a 'Golden Thread' in terms of the approach to service planning and the medium-term financial plan

8.4 **Financial Planning and Investment** - The Council faces the same challenges as other councils in Wales where demands for services exceed available resources. The Council regularly updates its medium-term financial plan to estimate the scale of the challenges it faces and has adopted an approach where potential solutions to closing the budget gap are continuously assessed and implemented.

A benefit of understanding budget pressures early in the budget setting cycle is to put the Council in a position where it can identify a continuous pipeline of solutions to support the MTFP and to undertake meaningful consultation on significant service and policy change.

The panel heard of the Council's plans to increase its focus on maintaining the wellbeing of its communities and investing in preventative actions as part of its medium to long term planning. This work is at early stages supported by the HDRC project and work being undertaken by the s151 officer to model the economic benefits of investment in prevention - work that is of interest to the wider CiPFA network in Wales.

The medium-term financial plan also sets out the Council's planned capital investments. The Council has adopted a risk appetite which enables the Council to respond to new investment opportunities in an agile manner. A particular feature is the policy to develop a pipeline of 'shovel ready' projects. This has positioned the Council well to take advantage of new funding opportunities, often with tight deadlines for making applications.

The approach has enabled the development of a larger capital programme which is delivering significant investment in infrastructure across the RCT area, teams responsible for delivering the capital programme reported that they had sufficient investment in capacity and capability to enable the Council to achieve its capital programme ambitions and welcomed the Council's approach.

8.5 **Partnerships -** The panel heard that the Council offers strategic leadership and direction, but it has also invested the time to develop those important trusting strategic relationships with its partners and wider stakeholders. This engenders a sense of inclusive collaboration with a focus on improving RCT for the people who live, work and visit there.

A partner commented '**Paul (CEO) has taken a clear leadership role at the PSB and given it shape, he makes himself available, takes a co-production approach**

and seeks feedback'. External partners and other stakeholders spoke positively of the Council's willingness to work inclusively, with examples given of the Council sharing its resources and expertise in the partnership space to further the wider public good. This is much valued by partners.

8.6 **Well supported scrutiny and assurance functions –** The panel heard that the Council has well supported and resourced scrutiny and assurance functions. Members and Officers identified that the Democratic Services Committee is very active ensuring that members can access the support they need to discharge their roles effectively.

The panel also heard that 'challenge' is welcomed by both members of the Executive and officers of the Council and that there is a positive response to recommendations from scrutiny with evidence of follow up actions in place.

The panel heard from across the political spectrum that scrutiny is taken seriously and there is an appropriate balance between pre and post scrutiny of decisions with some work to support policy development also undertaken.

The Governance and Audit Committee is led by an experienced Chair who works closely with his committee in ensuring the Committee fulfils its role. The Committee was reported to have good relationships with the internal audit service and Audit Wales and was confident in the systems of governance that the Council operates.

8.7 **Procurement** – the Council has invested in its procurement function, operating a 'grow your own' approach to securing a sufficient workforce to deliver the function. Improvement work over recent years has enabled the Council to embed social value requirements into its supply chain. Evidence of how well suppliers are delivering on these commitments are included in contract monitoring and there is work to understand the wider community impact of this approach in train. The Council has also incorporated net zero commitment into its approach, requiring carbon reduction plans to be submitted by suppliers. The Council reports that it plans to further develop its approach by extending digitisation across the function and making full use of data sciences approaches.

9.0 Executive Summary – Overall Conclusions

9.1 Overall, the panel concluded that Rhondda Cynon Taf is a good, well run and ambitious Council, focused on improving the lives of its citizens.

The Council demonstrated that it has a strong track record of delivery underpinned by an ethos of continuous improvement. The Council is working to better understand the impact and outcomes of its work, moving from a service-focused approach to one which is person-centred, and which will help to deliver its ambition to strengthen communities' resilience.

The panel further concluded that the Council is exercising the functions against the performance duties within the Local Government and Elections Act 2021.

9.2 The panel, whilst undertaking this process, met (in person and online) with a wide range of stakeholders. This included the Council's political and officer executive. All

elected members were afforded the opportunity to contribute, as were Council staff, partners, businesses, Trades Unions and residents. The panel triangulated the information gathered from these meetings and interactions with the documentation it had received prior to the site visit to form its overall findings and conclusions which are outlined in brief below. The panel has also suggested areas for improvement that the Council should consider which are addressed later in this report.

9.3   The panel identified the following positive attributes-:

- A strong, stable, and experienced political and professional officer leadership demonstrating a shared commitment to improving outcomes for the citizens of Rhondda Cynon Taf.

- Effective, respectful and professional Member-Officer relationships with appropriate levels of constructive challenge.

- An inclusive and supportive 'culture', developed over the last decade, that has created the conditions for deeper collaboration with partners, residents and businesses. This has generated opportunities for transformational change – the panel noted in several meetings a ''Team Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT)'' approach.

- Clear and effective governance systems are in place that are regularly reviewed to ensure their effectiveness. The panel identified that a particular strength of the Council surrounded its approach to financial planning that allows the Council to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its pressures and the identification of a continuous pipeline of potential budget solutions. This approach facilitates early engagement and consultation for change with Members and Officers and with the wider community.

- The panel also noted a clear 'Golden Thread' from the corporate plan, the medium-term financial plan (MTFP) to service planning, with appropriate challenge from the Chief Executive and senior elected members at the corporate level. The panel considered the Council to be self-aware with a mature approach to the way it approaches change.

- The panel identified no critical concerns from external regulators. There is evidence that the Council routinely responds to the findings and recommendations of external and internal auditors and that actions proposed in response to findings is the subject of scrutiny and assurance. The panel considers the Council's scrutiny and assurance arrangements to be strong and effective.

- Members reported that they are all encouraged to participate in the work of the Council. Political relationships across the Council are said to be good with a clear focus, regardless of political differences, on delivering for the communities of RCT.

The panel considered this shows political maturity across the political spectrum. All members reported that they are well supported by the democratic services function with a strong Democratic Services Committee that works to ensure members have the support they need to fulfil their roles. Elected members reported that the Leader's door is open to all, and the Chief Executive is visible and accessible.

- A well-respected Council – The panel heard from a range of staff and Trade Union representatives that the leadership (political and officers) and the human resources function is well respected. The panel also met with representatives of several staff networks set up to advance the Council's diversity, equality and inclusion agenda. Representatives were positive about the commitment of the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive, the development of the networks and the support they received from the EDI manager. The experience of change being effected across the management tiers was, however, said to be variable with more work to be done to embed the Council's policy intent in practice.

- Valued by partners – the panel heard from a range of partners (e.g. health, voluntary sector, Trivallis Housing Association, community organisations) that in the main the Council is well respected and partners welcome opportunities to collaborate with the council on shared priorities. Partners also commented on the quality of political and professional leadership of 'place' shown by the Council. Partners value the Council's willingness to share its resources and expertise in the partnership arena and to seek to shape policy at regional and national levels.

- A Council prepared to make difficult decisions – the panel saw evidence e.g. home to school transport, changes to accommodation for older people, of the Council executive leading conversations with the community to explain changes in policy or service provision needed to achieve financial balance. Whilst there was clear evidence of engagement with children and young people it was hard to evidence the impact on the decisions made from this engagement. The council plans to build on this work with more direct involvement in the democratic process of children and young people.

  The panel also noted the risk appetite adopted by the Council to pump prime fund the development of 'shovel ready' projects that have enabled the expansion of the Council's capital programme.

  The panel concluded this is a Council prepared to take difficult decisions whilst maintaining a focus on their longer-term aspirational goals. The panel noted that the Council is beginning to develop its approach to co-production, in line with its longer-term aspirations. An example given was the redesign of the day service provision for adults with a learning disability.

9.4 However, the Council does have some challenges. At the time of the PPA, the Council was at the very early stages of a long-term cultural change programme. The approach seeks to strengthen community resilience so that people enjoy improved wellbeing, are better able to support each other and consequently become less reliant on Council services over time. From the information gathered during the PPA, the panel formed

the view that the Council is well placed to shift practice to support the empowerment and agency of individuals and communities but that this requires a more intentional approach across the whole Council for it to have the impact desired by the council and be truly transformative

It was also evident to the panel that the Council needs to take more time to reach a clear and shared understanding of the long-term objectives that it is seeking to achieve. Involving partners and communities at the formative stage of the process will ensure there is a genuine opportunity for them to shape the change programme, to understand the objectives and for them to ensure that the mechanisms are in place to fully enable the change.

9.5 The panel are required within the legislation to assess the Council:

- Is exercising its functions effectively
- Is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively and
- Has effective governance in place to secure the above.

In addition, the Council identified the following areas where peer insight would be valued as part of the assessment in the following order:

- Demonstrating impact and outcomes for our communities and

- Building Community Resilience.

9.6 The panel found that as a corporate body the Council is overall exercising the functions against the performance duties within the Local Government and Elections Act 2021.

9.7 The panel identified improvement opportunities which are contained within Section 10 and 11 of this report. These areas of improvement have been developed in the spirit of sector-led improvement and are intended to support the Council on its continuing improvement journey.

10.0 Overview of Findings

10.1 **Effective Governance**

There are no recommendations for Effective Governance

The panel identified a strong, stable and experienced political and professional leadership who set a positive, inclusive culture with a firm focus on 'doing our best for our communities'. This pervades the Council's work internally but was also evident in its work with external partners.

The panel further recognised and heard that the Council has developed and nurtured this approach over the last decade, and that the Council is in a totally different and more positive place as a result. One Member quoted **"We are fortunate to have a culture that enables members to meaningfully participate"** in the Council's work, an example being the annual budget build where Member involvement in that process

was welcomed and the process regarded as being transparent. The Leader's door was said to be open to everyone and the panel also heard that relationships between Members and Officers is respectful and professional.

The panel concluded that the Chief Executive and Senior Leadership Team provide effective leadership and a supportive environment for the council's workforce. A quote from a member of SLT identified **"We are a strong SLT, we work together particularly when things get tight, an example of this was our work during the recent storms, where we all worked collectively together"**.

The panel observed that relationships between Members and Officers were respectful and professional. All those in leadership positions spoke of creating a culture where innovation is encouraged, there is a 'no blame' environment and there is a shared commitment to deliver for the communities of RCT.

The panel considers the Council has good governance arrangements in place and has established a wide range of committees, in line with the Council's constitution, that enables the Council to manage its business. The panel also considers the Governance and Audit Committee to be sound and effective and that the scrutiny arrangements are strong and supported by all political groups.

The panel recognised that the Council has a clear vision, supported by a recently revised Corporate Plan which aims to drive improved outcomes for its citizens by shifting from a service based to a person-centred approach that has the potential to be transformational. The Council has well understood and supported systems of governance to facilitate achievement of the Council's ambitions. The Leadership has a strong commitment to 'place' and this is valued not just internally but by its wider strategic partners and stakeholders.

The Council's own self-assessment was reported as good for overall governance, use of resources, and good in terms of performance against its 4 wellbeing objectives.

The Council has recently reviewed service planning and performance management arrangements. Service planning demonstrates a 'Golden Thread' to the corporate plan and medium-term financial plan. The annual challenge meetings led by the Chief Executive are well regarded by officers and ensure alignment. The approach helps senior officers to reflect on the 'so what'? question and to better articulate the impact and outcomes sought.

The Council has recently redesigned its performance reports to bring all data together in a 'dashboard' and this is increasingly being supported by case studies to demonstrate impact to complement output and process measures. Performance is reported into Cabinet on a quarterly basis with scrutiny committees also using the performance reports to design their own forward work programmes. There is also an annual review of the Council's overall performance. The panel saw evidence of continuous improvement across the Council's services and functions facilitated by an embedded approach to change.

The Council's approach to financial planning and investment is aligned with the strategic direction and Corporate Plan. The Council has adopted a risk appetite that

uses some capital resources to develop a pipeline of 'shovel ready' projects and this has resulted in a significant Capital Programme that is improving infrastructure across the County Borough.

The panel heard the Leader, Cabinet and SLT are trusted and respected with wider strategic partners and stakeholders. The panel heard that the Council is an important partner in regional settings and able to work in the wider collective priorities of the various partnerships. The willingness of RCT to step into leadership roles and to share resources and expertise is welcomed by external stakeholders.

The Cabinet is stable with experienced members who understand their Cabinet portfolios. The panel heard that there are good professional working relationships between Officers and Cabinet. A recent corporate change has better aligned Cabinet portfolios with departments and has been achieved with a high degree of consensus.

The panel met elected members from across the political groups. In the main, relationships were described as positive, respectful and mature whilst recognising party differences.

Relationships between the political Executive and Members, were described in the main as good with the Leader and Cabinet being accessible to Leaders of Opposition and wider members. An open-door approach was highlighted between the Leader, Cabinet and the wider political membership. A Member commented **''Political leadership is strong and well regarded we are extremely fortunate to have the quality of political leadership in RCT''**

10.2 Using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively

Overall, the panel concluded that the Council is effectively utilising its resources.

The Council delivered a balanced financial position for 2024/25.

The panel concluded that RCT is a Council that has strong corporate financial planning and management functions in place. The process of continually planning and reviewing the budget process cycle rather than undertaking these activities as an once a-year exercise, was considered by the panel to be a particular strength of the Council, valued by staff and Members alike.

The Medium-Term Financial Plan continues to show structural gaps, with projected shortfalls over the next three years, a common picture across Wales. The Council has been clear that whilst reserves provide short-term resilience, they are not a sustainable solution. Transformation, efficiency, and prevention measures are regarded by the Council as central to closing the gap.

Alongside revenue planning, the Council has set an ambitious £225M capital programme for 2025/26 to 2027/28, aimed at supporting the Council's corporate priorities and well-being objectives. This is a major investment programme but depends on external funding and capital receipts which require close monitoring.

Overall, the Council demonstrates strong short-term financial management and prudent use of reserves, but its longer-term financial sustainability depends on delivering transformation at scale and pace, reducing reliance on one-off funding, and ensuring robust monitoring of service and community impact. The Council has identified an 'invest to save reserve' to support the Council to innovate and transform new ideas and pump prime new initiatives as part of its response to pressures.

The Council is self-aware of the pressures. It has good financial processes and procedures in place to continue modelling the impact and management of the financial response. As at, 31 March 2025 the Council held a total of £191.987M in reserve.

The Council has systems in place that identify and manage risk through its strategic risk register. Risk is reported quarterly to Cabinet and risk is considered across the Council and not simply in service areas.

The panel identified the approach to financial planning taken by the Council is clearly owned by 'team RCT'. There is engagement with all Members at the formative stages of the budget build and collective consideration given to the risk to sustainability being a notable example of involvement, engagement and financial accountability.

The panel identified that the Council has ensured capacity and capability within its procurement function through an effective 'grow your own' workforce plan. Social value and commitment to climate mitigation/change have been embedded in its procurement practice. The Council is developing its approach to assessing the impact of social value commitments connected to the wider work it is doing to strengthen community resilience.

The panel heard that the Council's Human Resources team are valued across the service areas and with Trade Unions. There are strong social partnerships with the Trade Unions, good engagement and access to the HR team. Professional relationships have been built up over time. The arrangements demonstrate a mature relationship that recognises that although parties may not always agree, there is a willingness to listen for the common good of the workforce and citizens and that the Council and Trade Unions will work through open dialogue to reach agreement and to avoid disputes.

The Council has a good track record of 'growing its own' and is proud of its achievements in employing local people within its apprentice programme and its graduate trainee programme. The HR team is seen as being responsive to the needs identified by services, offering a blend of on-line and face to face training and development activities. The Council has prioritised recruitment and retention of its workforce and is seeing some positive progress in filling hard-to-recruit-to jobs. The cultural shift the Council wants to make will place further demands on the HR team. The panel concluded that early attention to the workforce development strategy is needed to support the cultural shift that is planned and will be an important consideration to support the transformation programme and to enable the HR function to adapt as may be necessary.

The Panel heard that the leadership shown by the Deputy Leader and Chief Executive to EDI is valued by those participating in the EDI staff networks. Those participating

in the networks felt that these network mechanisms were important and representatives spoke positively about the support they received from the EDI manager. The networks have been in place for varying lengths of time. Network representatives reported a mixed picture across the management tiers of the Council in terms of embedding the Council's EDI commitments. The Council has recently set up a strategic group to support the delivery of its Strategic Equality Plan and training is being rolled out across the Council.

The panel considers that the practice across the management structure would benefit from further review and that this should be linked to the roll out of EDI training. Further action is planned to set up a parallel programme for members. The panel encourages the Council to give this priority focus.

The panel heard that communication across the workforce had been strengthened through the introduction of the employee newsletter and blogs. Focused attention is being given to ensuring all staff members can access this communication, including those who may be digitally excluded. The panel noted that these communications are not currently extended to the school's workforce. There are face-to-face top 100 meetings between middle managers, the SLT and political Leadership on a quarterly basis. This enables direct communication with this staff group which can include discussion about the Council's position, challenges and successes and an opportunity to provide feedback to the SLT and Executive. The panel heard that these arrangements are well attended and well regarded.

The Council is undertaking infrastructure upgrades including to its Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) and website to improve customer experiences. A team with capability to review and redesign business processes also works alongside the technical digital functions. This growing capability will directly support the Council's transformation ambitions to improve the user experience and reduce costs. Work to develop a data sciences capability is also underway, albeit less mature than the technology function.

The Council has drawn together staff with data skills who now form the basis of a new corporate data capability. There is also a HDRC which is supporting the development of evidence-based and intelligence-led approaches. The Council advised that a data framework is under development with plans to develop this into a more holistic data management strategy. This work has the potential to form an important building block that can play a key role in facilitating the cultural shift the Council is seeking to make as set out in the revised Corporate Plan.

To date, the digital programme has not made significant contributions to reducing the net cost of Council services. The s151 officer reported that there would need to be a more critical consideration of digital priorities going forward. To support this requirement, changes are being made to the mechanisms for agreeing digital priorities, which will include appraisal from officers within the finance function.

The panel identified an example of practice worthy of note in this area -:

Strong financial management and budgetary planning - The Council has adopted a continuous approach to the way it undertakes its financial planning, having moved

away from a once-a-year exercise. This approach allows the Council to be well prepared in identifying and responding to budget pressures, securing ownership of the financial position amongst all members of the Council and to meaningfully engage with those impacted by proposed policy and service responses at formative stages.

Overall, the panel considers that RCT has integrated its financial and wider resource planning with the objectives set out in the Corporate Plan. The panel saw several examples where support functions were fully responsive to the changing needs of services e.g. recruitment and retention, the HDRC project, the financial modelling of preventative work. Looking forward, there is evidence that support functions understand that they will need to adapt and develop if the Council is to deliver on its ambitious transformation agenda, however, the changes that will be needed have yet to be clearly identified and agreed. The panel has the following area for improvement/recommendation.

Areas for Improvement/Recommendations – Resources

The Council is giving careful consideration to the way it will implement the changes necessary to deliver its ambitions for transformation, including the capacity it will need to deliver the changes.

1.	The Council is encouraged to take the time needed to ground its approach in evidence and to give early consideration to the role that workforce, digital, data and communications will need to play to enable the delivery of the changes that it wants to achieve

10.3 Effective exercise of functions

There are no recommendations for the exercise of functions.

11.0 Areas of focus identified by the Council

11.1 Demonstrating Impact and Outcomes for our Communities

In terms of strength:

The panel considered the Council is in a strong position to progress this work and was supportive of the Council focussing its actions and resources to better understand the impacts and outcomes delivered for the citizens in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

The panel identified that the strong performance management framework the Council has in place provides a firm platform to clearly identify priorities and to deliver these through the Council's governance systems. In addition, the collective oversight through the Chief Executive, political leadership and SLT to deliver on the Council's planning and service delivery systems will support the Council's ambition to demonstrate 'person centred' impact and outcome.

The panel further identified that by taking evidence led approaches at the community level using tools such as the HDRC approach will enable the Council to evolve and strengthen their measurement of impact and outcome at the community level and that

there was a clear appetite from Members and wider partners to be an integral part of testing impact at the community level. This is not easy territory to navigate, and the panel are complimentary of the Council taking this proactive approach.

In terms of challenge and improvement:

The Panel recognises that some steps are being taken to develop corporate enabling functions to support transformational change, but this work is ongoing and not complete.

The use of data to understand impact is not consistent across the Council and is an area the Council should develop and develop at pace. This could include sharing examples of existing practice to indicate the type of approaches which could be used - e.g. 'what good looks like', though the Council may want to further innovate beyond these.

To support the Council in this area, the panel suggests the Council move toward a more person-centred approach to measure impact and outcomes. This will require capturing and embedding qualitative and quantitative measures which demonstrate the views and experiences of residents and communities. Such measures could be applied for both measuring service outcomes and place outcomes (for example, whether residents feel it is an area where communities support each other).

The Council should carefully consider what these measures look like and how they impact the Council's work.

In establishing measures, the panel suggest the Council should collaborate with partners and communities. The panel also proposes that the Council builds a clearer understanding of the residents and communities with whom they currently engage and develop a plan for wider engagement with all communities, including currently under-represented groups.

Areas for Improvement/Recommendations – Demonstrating Impact and Outcomes for our Communities

The Council is building on its existing strong performance framework to integrate its work on engagement and community resilience in measuring outcome and impact.

The Council understands it needs to adopt a test and learn approach to the delivery of the change it wants to make and this needs to be done jointly with partners.

2.	The Council is encouraged in taking forward this process to develop the skills and capacities to enable it to: • Work with communities and partners to design their impact and outcome measures at community and County Borough levels. • Measure how impact and outcomes vary across demographics and geography.

| | • To evaluate the extent to which existing engagement approaches provide for and encourage participation and involvement. |

11.2 Building Community Resilience

The panel considered this area in terms of the current strengths, challenge and improvements facing the Council in this area.

In terms of strength:

The panel heard that the Council's commitment to building community resilience is well supported. There was strong evidence of this triangulated from the panel's discussions across the Council, its wider strategic partners, businesses, voluntary and community sector, and residents.

There is a willingness, indeed a desire, among partners to collaborate with the Council on this work. For example, this could be through potential joint commissioning of services, aligning work in the wider areas of community cohesion and community resilience, and sharing data but opportunities are not restricted to these few examples.

The Council has a track record of performing well in times of emergencies that have been evident over the last few years with the named storms that have caused real time damage and distress to RCT communities. RCT have well developed working relationships in coordinating emergency responses across its partners, statutory agencies, voluntary sectors, businesses and with the communities of RCT itself. SLT noted **"Trust with communities has been built through actions"** a direct quote when discussing the Council's wider response to flooding.

The Council has some good examples of community infrastructure which will serve this process well and could be built upon, this includes community hubs and neighbourhood networks. The support that the Council has provided directly to voluntary, community, social enterprise, and community business sector organisations (for example, through small grants programmes and through Community Asset Transfer) further provide positive examples of how the Council already helps create the conditions for community resilience by enabling communities to act and lead change locally.

In terms of challenge and improvement:

The Council is ambitious and sees real value in the delivery of this approach, both for the Council and its communities. It aligns well with its approach to service delivery that is impactful and its shift to a more impact and outcome-based approach for measuring the change it creates for RCT communities. There is evidence of existing positive practice in building community resilience, but the panel suggests this has not yet been brought together to shape a cohesive vision and roadmap for achieving the scale of transformation sought.

To support the Council moving forward the panel suggests the Council takes time to achieve greater clarity of intent and develop a shared understanding of community resilience.

Following its review and discussions, the panel concludes that the Council would benefit from developing greater clarity in relation to both what outcomes are sought in relation to community resilience and how these can best be realised.

As indicated above, the Council has several strengths to build on. However, the panel's engagement with partners, communities, residents and young people, suggests that community resilience needs to extend beyond the ability to withstand and adapt to ''shocks'' and focus on the strengths within communities, their assets, and shaping the enabling conditions that build a sense of agency and empower communities to achieve community-led change. This will require a broadening out of the Council's current working definition of community resilience.

The panel suggests that the process of building a shared understanding of community resilience is one in which partners and communities are involved alongside the Council. This involvement would ideally be from the 'beginning' to help form the 'policy' type joint approach ensuring this is a collaborative process and adopting a true partnership approach for community resilience.

Identifying whether this is a Council or place-based agenda would add further clarity as the Council develops this shared understanding.

In relation to organisational readiness the Council is aware this will require significant cultural change. To be effective, the panel suggests that this change needs to be considered and approached as a whole-Council agenda. The Council will want to consider the type of organisational development and change programme that can best support this transformation, including aligning corporate services to support this.

The Council is at an early but exciting stage; it has the opportunity to work with its partners and communities to build a compelling vision and shared understanding for community resilience which can then inform how this work is taken forward, including how it is integrated with the developing work on impact and outcomes. The Council is ambitious and well placed to start this work.

Areas for Improvement/Recommendations – Building Community Resilience

The Council recognises that it needs to take sufficient time to develop a shared understanding of what it is seeking to achieve.

Some steps have been taken to get the Council ready for this change which includes a realignment of the senior team.

3.	The Council is encouraged to: • Invest time in learning from practice elsewhere and involve its communities and partners in developing a shared understanding of community resilience • Understand and establish the key enabling resources, such as data, workforce, communication and engagement method, digital systems, to support the change programme.

	- Identify opportunities to test, learn and iterate the approach prior to scaling up. - Take a whole Council approach to the change, ensuring that each part of the Council understands how it needs to adapt to bring about the cultural change that is sought

12 Other observations

No other observations.

13.0 Improvement Support

13.1 If the Council would like to discuss any support required to address the areas for improvement, please contact Jo Hendy, WLGA Chief Officer Improvement.

14.0 Acknowledgements

14.1 The Panel and the WLGA would want to extend their thanks to the Council, its members and officers for the support in coordinating documentation requests, responses to queries, arranging meetings and workshops and providing responsive onsite support. In particular, the support from the following officers is noted and appreciated:

- Marc Crumbie – Head of Internal Audit
- Emma Wilkins - Cabinet Office Manager

The Panel would also want to extend their thanks to all the organisations, partners, staff, residents, businesses, groups, and other interviewees for their valuable inputs and contributions whilst undertaking the panel performance assessment.