Annual Corporate Performance Report &
Self Assessment Report
2023-24

This document contains information about the planning and progress of the Council's priorities which are the Council's Well-being objectives as required by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and also the Council's summary Self-Assessment as required by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg
This document is also available in Welsh

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Contents

Executive Summary

The Council serves an area in the South Wales Valleys covering 424 square kilometres, stretching from the Brecon Beacons National Park in the north to the Capital City of Cardiff in the south. The range of services delivered is diverse in nature and complexity - from maintaining green spaces, collecting recycling and refuse, delivering meals on wheels, educating our young people and caring for those that require support to remain independent. The terrain of the county borough is equally diverse. Services are delivered within the community and from a significant number of locations, ranging from offices, depots and frontline buildings.

This report incorporates our annual performance report for 2023/24 along with the outcome of our annual self-assessment for 2023/24.

When reporting our performance for the year and conducting our annual self-assessment, we have been honest and have identified areas for improvement. Our embedded service self-evaluation process has helped us to demonstrate a commitment to continually reviewing our arrangements to answer the key questions in respect of how well we are performing, how do we know and what needs to improve.

Based on the review undertaken and the evidence in place, *the Council's arrangements have provided the basis to maintain the organisations' financial stability and resilience, during a period of significant financial pressures and constrained funding, through robust planning, prioritisation and management of scarce resources. This position was underpinned by sound scrutiny and decision-making processes and well-established self-assessment arrangements, and supported Corporate Plan priority areas, wider service delivery and improved outcomes for service users. A small number of areas for improvement have been identified to further strengthen existing processes. Accordingly, based on the self-assessment process the Council has demonstrated that it has exercised its functions effectively; used its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and that governance arrangements were effective for securing the above.*

Our annual self-assessment has also identified areas for improvement, and these are included under the relevant sections of this report. These areas will be monitored throughout 2024/25 as part of our performance management arrangements.

If you have any comments or views about this document, or would like more information, please contact the Council's Performance Team improvement@rctcbc.gov.uk

Our Annual Performance Report

SECTION 1

How we delivered our Priorities during 2023/24

The 2022/23 annual Self-Assessment contained a section which described our progress in delivering our Priorities since the introduction of our Corporate Plan in March 2020. At that time our assessment of progress since 2020 was…'*Despite the unprecedented challenges experienced by us all since we introduced in our Plan, looking back at our progress since 2020 we are able to evidence that we have delivered most of what we set out to achieve'*.

In our 2023/24 Self-Assessment, our focus was on reviewing any outstanding actions from the Corporate Plan for currency and relevance and completing these where possible. Following review, where completion was not possible, we ensured they were carried forward into our new Corporate Plan.

Our well-being objectives of PEOPLE, PLACES and PROSPERITY were reviewed and agreed for 2023/24 (as required by the WFG Act). Each of our well-being objectives were supported by detailed delivery plans and these were monitored (via quarterly reporting) and scrutinised by Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Governance and Audit Committee continued to review the Council's governance, internal control, and risk management arrangements. For context, the quarterly performance reports comprised of the following sections:

Section 1: Introduction

Section 2: Revenue Budget Monitoring - setting out the detailed financial spend against budget across our Revenue Budget with exceptions highlighted.

Section 3: Capital Budget Monitoring – setting out spend across our Capital Programme with exceptions highlighted and a section comprising a breakdown of Prudential Indicators.

Section 4: Organisational Health data – includes staff turnover, sickness absence, organisational health related investment areas and an update on the Council's Strategic Risk Register.

Section 5: Progress in delivering our Corporate Priorities; People, Places and Prosperity.

Section 6: A summary of progress and an illustration of Key Achievements arising from the Climate Change Strategy.

The 2023/24 end of year report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 17th July 2024, and then the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 22nd July 2024.

2023/24 was to some extent a transitional year from the 'old' Corporate Plan into the 'new' Corporate Plan. This gave the Council the opportunity to review how the needs and demands of our communities had changed during the time of the 2020/24 Corporate Plan, and we spent time during the winter and spring months of 2023/24 planning for the future and engaging with our residents.

The following section of this report provides you with an overview of the progress we made in delivering our priorities during 2023/24, grouped under the priorities of PEOPLE, PLACES AND PROSPERITY.

People

We made good progress in delivering against our PEOPLE priority and our key achievements, and how they also relate to fulfilling the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, are outlined below. However, our data shows there is still more to do to enable people to live independently in their communities with the right support and care at the right time, provide modern accommodation that meets the needs of people who can no longer live at home and protect children, young people and adults at risk from harm, neglect and exploitation. Key themes within this priority require long term commitment to be fully realised and work in these areas form part of our new Corporate Plan within our 'People and Communities' Well-being Objective.

We said we would:
- **support our residents who are older, vulnerable or who have disabilities, to remain independent and have a good quality of life**
- **encourage all residents to lead active and healthy lifestyles and maintain their mental well-being**
- **work to integrate health and social care and provide support for those with mental health problems and complex needs improve services for children and young people and ensuring the needs of children are considered in everything we do**

Applying the Five Ways of Working

In delivering our PEOPLE Priority, we applied the Five Ways of Working by:

- **Involving** people with a learning disability in the re-tendering process for Supported Living contracts for people with a Learning Disability and progressing our Children's Services Participation Strategy to ensure co-production and that the voice of children and young people are heard in service development and delivery.
- **Collaborating** with South Wales Police to provide an early intervention referral pathway to allow people who appear vulnerable or in need of support to access support within their community quickly.
- Implementing the **co-produced** Day Services Strategy and operating model for people with a learning disability. This remodelling of the Council's day service provision to a new East and West structure, including smaller community-based groups, will ensure that services in the **long term** are delivered in a way that achieves the best possible individual outcomes for people, based on need and demand, whilst making the best use of Council resources.
- Continuing to work with colleagues in Health to achieve greater **integration** of services e.g. implementing the home first model approach to achieve timely discharge from hospital for patients.

Continuing to invest in services to **prevent** escalation of need increasing or enable recovery and independence e.g. our Community Coordinators who enable residents to access support, within their

communities, as early as possible, our reablement service in Adult Services and Resilient Families Service in Children's Services.

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PEOPLE Priority	
Prosperous	• Commissioned Community Catalyst to support people and local partners to develop small enterprises that can provide real choice and increase the number and range of homecare and support options available in the community. • Worked in partnership with Love Treorchy and Our Aberdare to promote local events within our town centres to encourage people to visit our town centres and shop locally e.g. Santa Saturdays in Treorchy Library.
Resilient	• Continued to make our theatre productions more environmentally sustainable by reusing as much as we can from previous productions, reducing the amount of one-off items we purchase, and recycling anything that cannot be reused. • Achieved the Sustainable Food Places Bronze Award, which recognises the excellent community partnership work undertaken throughout the County Borough to promote healthy, sustainable, and local food. The award highlights the Council's commitment to addressing significant social challenges such as food poverty, diet-related illnesses, the decline of family farms, and the loss of independent food retailers.
Healthier	• Provided new and different opportunities for people of all ages to get and stay active in Council run facilities and community activities. This has included introducing cold water swims at Lido Ponty. Visits to our leisure and sports centres, where people are undertaking physical activity, has continued to improve since the pandemic. 1,519,304 bookings were made in our indoor sport and leisure facilities compared to 1,432,584 last year. • The number of Leisure for Life Members exceeds pre pandemic levels with 11,045 members. • We didn't make as much progress as we planned on strengthening how we involve customers by reintroducing customer surveys and evaluating the feedback to inform service changes and improvements in our leisure facilities. This will be a priority in our new Corporate Plan. • Continued to take forward our Children Looked After Prevention Strategy and despite a small increase in the number of Children Looked After, we have seen positive improvements in the rate of Becoming Looked After for under 1 years. At the end of March 2024, we had 637 Children Looked After compared to 624 in 2023, 655 in 2022, and 717 in 2020. • Reduced numbers of children on the Child Protection Register since 2019. At the end of March 2024, 331 children were on the Child Protection Register compared to 407 in March 2023 • 98% of Children Looked After who responded to our annual service user survey stated that they felt 'safe where they lived' and 95% felt 'well cared for'. • In line with the Welsh Government ambition of eliminating profit from children's care and our Residential Transformation Strategy for Children Looked After, we have opened Willowford House, registered Ystrad Fechan as a Children's Home, recruited and trained staff for these new facilities as well as purchase a number of other properties that will be refurbished and registered as children's homes. The % of Children Looked After in not for profit residential care has increased from 21% in April 2023 to 28% in March 2024. • We have also undertaken targeted recruitment of foster carers to meet identified key areas of need. In 2023/24, we had 268 RCT Foster Carers. This compares to 286 on 31st March

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PEOPLE Priority	

Healthier

2023. While not the growth we need to see, retention has improved with 11 less losses of placement capacity compared to the previous year.

- In line with our Children Looked After Prevention Strategy, the Magu Team is fully operational and has worked with 78 families 2023/24. The rate of Becoming Looked After for under 1 years has fallen from 28% in 2022/23 to 18% in 2023/24 which demonstrates the positive impact of this improved pre-birth support.

- We didn't make as much progress as we planned to improve the numbers of children who can reunify home who have spent some time being looked after by the local authority. Between April 2023 and March 2024, of the 119 children who ceased to be Looked After, 50 children were returned home (42%). This is less than in the previous year when 57% returned home. We will continue to refresh our permanence policy in 2024 and this will be monitored through our new Corporate Plan 2024/30.

- 95% of adults were happy with the care and support that they have had, 87% of adults had been actively involved in decisions about how their care and support was provided and 95% agreed that they live in a home that supports their wellbeing.

- Provided reablement support and assistive technologies to ensure our older, vulnerable or those who have a disability can remain independent within their communities. We completed 1,179 reablement packages between 1st April - 31st March 2024. Of these packages, 1,160 reduced, maintained or mitigated the need for support (98%).

- We didn't make as much progress as we planned on our collaborative project with Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil Councils to procure a digital Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) solution which will provide more opportunities for broadening the assistive technology that we currently offer that meets the needs of residents. Unfortunately, the initial tender could not be awarded due to the cost of the new solution being significantly higher than anticipated. Options are being explored regarding the next steps.

- Worked with Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB to implement the home first model approach to achieve timely discharge from hospital for patients. Data provided from Health in 2023/24 shows that:
  - the numbers of people who are delayed because they are undergoing social care assessment are relatively low in RCT (207 delays awaiting a social care assessment out of a total 1867 delays).
  - the numbers of people who are delayed because they are awaiting social worker allocation is also low (34 delays out of a total of 1867 delays)
  - the numbers of people who are delayed because they are awaiting home care package (170 delays out of a total of 1867 delays)
  - the numbers of people who are delayed because they are awaiting care home availability (218 delays out of a total of 1867 delays)

- Whilst we have not made the progress that we would have hoped for, we have worked with regional health and social partners to agree a new governance structure, workforce plan and fully costed commissioning intent to deliver the new Integrated Community Services model. This work has taken longer than anticipated and a regional director has now been appointed to manage the implementation of the new regional model from April 2024.

- We planned to complete a review of current Community Mental Health Services with our Health colleagues and develop options to redesign our joint service offer to meet current and future long term need and demand pressures. This work has not been completed and a new work programme and timescales have been agreed with Health for 2024/25.

	Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PEOPLE Priority
More Equal	• Continued to develop our housing offers so residents can enjoy the benefits of independent living e.g. Extra Care facilities and Supported Housing Schemes. • Implemented our new co-produced day service offer for people with a learning disability to improve access community-based services and volunteering and employment opportunities. • Celebrated the 30-year anniversary of Vision Products which is a supported business based in Pontyclun that offers meaningful support, training and employment opportunities for local people with disabilities to provide a diverse range of products and services to its customers. The celebratory events also included the current team at Vision Products undertaking a mural painting project creating a Tree of Diversity, with the help of a local mural artist, as part of the refurbishment of their canteen facility • Completed 483 Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) in 158,993 days. Based on satisfaction surveys completed following a DFG (Q3), 95% agreed that they feel more confident and independent after adaptation was installed/completed, 92% agreed that it is now easier for family/carer to assist with daily needs after completion and 97% agreed that their quality of life has improved after work completed. • Continued to implement the findings from the Autside review to ensure services are accessible to neurodivergent children, young people and families. This has included delivering sensory environments training within our youth club environments and sensory training for our family services providers.
Cohesive Communities	• Strengthened links between our Community Hubs and Adult Social Services so that residents have access to good quality information, advice and assistance within the community without the need for statutory social services. 1,693 individual resident requests were responded to by Community Co-ordinators which may otherwise have been dealt with by statutory services. • Strengthened relationships with residents and community groups and found out what is important to residents by utilising our 13 Neighbourhood Networks.
Vibrant Culture & Welsh Language	• Provided and promoted more opportunities for our residents to communicate with the Council and each other in Welsh. Of 563 Flying start places offered, 90 (18%) have opted for Welsh medium provision, a notable increase. • Provided a range of free heritage activities within Rhondda Heritage Park to encourage residents and visitors to take part in arts and heritage activities. Visits to our heritage and visitor's centres have continued to bounce back from the pandemic. 70,852 visits were made to our heritage and visitors centres compared to 66,678 last year.
Globally Responsible	• Participated fully in the National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

'Delivery in Action'

- We commissioned Community Catalyst to support people and local partners to develop small enterprises that can provide real choice and increase the number and range of homecare and support options available in the community. This case study demonstrates how this can positively impact the provider and the community.
- We agreed the transformation of Day Services for Older People to create a more efficient and effective service offer, providing older people with access to modern facilities, and ensuring better use of Council resources. This case study demonstrates the impact that day services can have on older people in our communities.
- During the year, a total of 82 Neighbourhood Network meetings have taken place with 916 attendees. These case studies demonstrate the positive impact of our Neighbourhood Networks.

A detailed update of progress against our People Priority can be viewed in our Q4 Performance report.

Places

We made good progress in delivering against our PLACES priority and our key achievements, and how they also relate to fulfilling the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, are outlined below. However, our data shows there is still more to do to reach our national recycling targets by 2025, and to get more people into our substance misuse programmes. There has once again been significant capital investment across the highways infrastructure, with revised delivery timescales for some schemes and progress updates will be reported in 2024/25.

Some key themes within this priority require longterm commitment to be fully realised and work in these areas form part of our new Corporate Plan Wellbeing Objectives 'Work and Business' and 'Nature and the Environment'.

We said we would:

- **Keep RCT clean through efficient street cleaning services, minimise the amount of waste we send to landfill, achieve our recycling targets through weekly recycling and regular refuse collections, and reduce our carbon footprint.**
- **Keep the County Borough moving, by making improvements to roads, pavements and public transport, whilst also improving air quality**
- **Ensure the County Borough is one of the safest places in Wales, with high levels of community cohesion, where residents feel safe**
- **Investing and looking after our parks and greenspaces**

Applying the Five Ways of Working

In delivering our PLACES Priority, we applied the Five Ways of Working by:

- Continuing our work to achieve greater community **integration** of domestic abuse services with the launch of the Community Domestic Abuse Project – Removing the Stigma of Domestic Abuse.
- **Collaborating** with South Wales Police on various initiatives including illegal driving on all coal tips, and preventing anti-social behaviour. We have also worked with local schools to encourage responsible dog ownership and promote 'No Dog Fouling' and 'No Dogs on Pitches' messages.
- **Involving** residents in our decision-making process. Examples include development of the Revised Local Flood Risk Management Strategy and Action Plan and in extending the RCT Dog Control Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO).
- Continued to boost our flood defences through **long-term**, **preventative** measures to alleviate flood risk following Storm Dennis in February 2020

	Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PLACES priority
Prosperous	• Progressed highways schemes that will benefit communities now and in the future including Bridge repairs at Castle Inn Bridge in Treforest and restoration of the Grade II listed historic Iron Tram Bridge in Trecynon. • Engaged and progressed schemes that will benefit communities now and in the future including progressing the new walking and cycling route through the Rhondda Fach and engaging with residents to shape future plans.
Resilient	• Invested in Flood resilience through our Flood risk work including improvements at Mountain Ash and providing information on our new Flood Risk Management web pages. • In 2023-24, 4.93 hectares of green sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) were approved, including 465m^2 of green/blue roofs, 77 tree pits and 19 bioretention systems. These schemes will help manage and control surface water to prevent flooding. • Invested, and celebrated our green spaces including the Dare Valley Country Parks 50th Anniversary. • Planted over 362 trees in areas with low tree canopy cover including Brynna, Llanharan, Beddau, Church Village, Gilfach Goch, Glyncoch and Tonyrefail and a further 30,175 hedging plants across school grounds, parks and open spaces. • Progressed the design, build, operation and maintenance contract for the Land based Solar Farm in Coed Ely. Contract tenders are currently being evaluated. • Concluded ground investigations for Dare Valley hydro scheme and progressed the selection process to appoint a consultant for the next stage. • Completed the Amgen 1.5 MW single wind turbine, which became operational from 15 September 2023, generating energy immediately.
Healthier	• Progressed investment in our parks and play areas to ensure they provide a sanctuary for residents, contribute to improved physical and mental well-being, engage with nature, encourage play and opportunities to come together including the construction of Canolfan Calon Taf in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park. • Provided support to those in need of help with substance misuse through our work with Barod and promoted the support we provide for this and domestic abuse. • Worked in partnership on the 'RCTCBC Community Domestic Abuse Project – Removing the Stigma of Domestic Abuse' to expand and improve the profile and access to our support services with the use of bespoke domestic abuse vehicle. • Produced the 2023 Air Quality Progress Report • Continued to seek and maximise grant funding streams to increase the number of EV charging points in place on Council owned public car parks/public, community centre and leisure/education sites. Further detail can also be found on the Council's EV Charging Strategy and EV Charging Web page. Numbers • Completed the new allotment site at Crybin Ddu at Ynysybwl featuring 14 full size plots, and progressed further renovation works at allotment sites in the Rhondda. • Progressed active travel schemes that will improve health and well-being including the new walking and cycling route through the Rhondda Fach and engaging with residents to shape future plans.

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PLACES priority

More Equal	• Supported White Ribbon Day in November, the global initiative/campaign to end men's violence against women and girls • Continued to protect our vulnerable residents from doorstep crime and illegal traders and holding those traders to account, and safeguarded vulnerable individuals from nuisance and scam phone calls. • Continued to tackle environmental crime and holding those who commit the offences accountable.
Cohesive Communities	• Completed construction of Canolfan Calon Taf in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park offering a range of opportunities to the local community including training courses and health and wellbeing initiatives. • Supported Keep Wales Tidy to undertake school and community litter-picks across RCT. • Increased Wi-Fi availability at 13 Community Centres and at the 2 RCT Bowls Centres • Progressed the 2023/24 Shared Prosperity Fund RCT Community Support Grant Programme to support community groups
Vibrant Culture & Welsh Language	• Promoted and supported the Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru 2024 within Rhondda Cynon Taf • Undertook community engagement and fundraising and Infrastructure and Spatial Planning for the event.
Globally Responsible	• Progressed our plans to tackle and reduce the impact of Climate Change through the Climate Change Strategy 'Think Climate RCT' (2022-2025) and associated Decarbonisation Strategy and Action Plan. • Prepared residents for changes in Workplace Recycling Regulations 2024 by delivering bins, posters and new recycling bags to all schools and Council buildings. There was also an increase in calls and queries from businesses to assist in recycling more, including food. • Delivered 3,245 food bins, 709 green waste sacks and 2,349 residents registered for nappy collections. • Recycled 67.23% of all waste collected. • Updated the Council's compliance with the Environmental Protection (Single-Use Plastic Products) (Wales) Act 2023 which became law in September 2023.

'Delivery in Action'

Continued to extend an invitation to Schools and Community Groups to take an interactive trip in to the world of recycling at the Alun Maddox Education Centre - Bryn Pica.

A detailed update of progress against our PLACES Priority can be viewed in our Q4 Performance report.

Prosperity

We made good progress in delivering against our PROSPERITY priority and our key achievements, and how they also relate to fulfilling the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, are outlined below. However, our data shows there is still more to do to revitalise our town centres, meet local housing needs and ensure young people achieve the best possible educational outcomes. Key themes within this priority require longterm commitment to be fully realised and work in these areas form part of our new Corporate Plan within our 'People and Communities' and 'Work and Business' Wellbeing Objectives.

We said we would:

- **invest in our town centres, creating vibrant, thriving places people wish to live, work and socialise**
- **deliver major regeneration and transport schemes to create better places to live and work**
- **ensure we have good schools so all children can access a great Education**
- **increase the number of quality homes available and affordable to provide greater housing choice for residents**
- **ensure a broad offer of skills and employment programmes for all ages**

Applying the Five Ways of Working

In delivering our PROSPERITY Priority, we applied the Five Ways of Working by:

- **Involving** the local community and a wide range of stakeholders in the development of the Aberdare Town Centre Strategy
- **Collaborating** with Registered Social Landlords, private developers and private landlords to provide homes which meet local housing needs
- Planning for the **Long term** educational needs of our young people by investing in new school buildings, improving learning environments, removing surplus places and making our schools net zero carbon in operation whenever possible
- **Integrating** our workforce planning requirements with supporting young people, especially those facing specific challenges, to access work and training opportunities including through our graduate, apprenticeship and trainee schemes and working with local businesses to provide work experience for care experienced young people
- **Preventing** homelessness through supporting building new affordable homes, specialist housing provision, returning empty properties to use, working with the private rented sector and providing effective support to people at risk of homelessness.

Prosperous	**Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PROSPERITY Priority**

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PROSPERITY Priority

- Supported sustainable growth of our local business community through a package of grants and support which will encourage growth of local jobs, regeneration of rundown or underused sites and carbon reduction and energy efficiency measures.
  - ➢ These programmes have supported 106 organisations to achieve a range of outcomes, including creating 39 FTE jobs and introducing 7 carbon reduction measures to their premises.
- Developed our tourism offer through working with local business to deliver the RCT Tourism Strategy and supporting opportunities for additional visitor accommodation across the County Borough, including undertaking a tender process for repurposing Rock Ground from Council offices to a quality hotel and spa.
- Supported local small and medium sized businesses to supply goods and services to the Council through producing a local business directory and updating the Council's website with advice and guidance for businesses.
- Delivering the A4119 Coed Ely dualling scheme, which is progressing to programme
- Continued to engage with broadband suppliers to understand their programme of works in RCT and to inform their plans to improve areas of poor connectivity.
- Continued to promote investment with completion of the Robertstown Business Units development and 16 of the 20 units already let and occupied by a range of businesses.
- Developed a Town centre strategy for Aberdare and drafted proposals for a Tonypandy Town centre strategy.
- Continued to deliver the Pontypridd, Porth and Mountain Ash regeneration strategies and frameworks, including completion of the Porth Transport Hub and implementing the Southern Gateway projects in Pontypridd.
  - ➢ Latest available data (Q1 2024/25) shows vacancy rates for retail premises remain low in Pontypridd (8.25%) and Treorchy (4.17%) but are currently higher in Aberdare (17.73%) and Porth (17.21%). It is anticipated that the new Aberdare Town Centre Strategy and the opening of the Porth Transport Hub will have a positive impact going forwards.
  - ➢ The latest available data (2021), shows higher business birth rates in Rhondda Cynon Taf (12.5) compared to Wales (11.6) and the UK as a whole (11.5), demonstrating the favourable conditions for business development. However, business death rates are also higher than national averages (14.5 in RCT, 11.2 in Wales, 11.8 UK).
- Continued our investment in 21st Century learning environments for young people:
  - o Llanilltud Faerdref primary school became the first school in Wales to be delivered under the Mutual Investment Model, with the new building opening to pupils in April 2024. External works are due for completion in autumn 2024
  - o Construction of a 240 place Welsh medium school for YGG Llyn y Forwyn is progressing, however inclement weather has impacted on progress resulting in revision to the completion date. The Council and partners are working to mitigate this position.
  - o Good progress across the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme, with new builds at Ysgol Afon Wen and Ysgol Bro Taf on target for completion for the new academic year. Detailed updates for all schemes are available on the Council website.
- Continued to work with registered social landlords to develop and deliver the large scale social housing development programme, through co-ordination with housing leaders and allocation and monitoring of the WG Social Housing Grant. 26 schemes were supported by the SHG in 2023/24, with an allocation of £26M. 8 schemes used local contractors.

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PROSPERITY Priority	
Prosperous	➢ 89 affordable homes delivered in 2023/24 compared to 168 in 2022/23. - Continued to bring empty homes back into use through the Empty Homes Strategy, including the delivery of the National Empty Homes Grant scheme on behalf of Welsh Government. ○ Following 627 interventions, 227 empty homes were brought back into use in 2023/24 - Worked in partnership to provide employment support programmes: ○ 182 young people aged 16 – 24 and 317 adults supported into employment. ○ 441 people supported to gain a vocational qualification. - Offered employment schemes and apprenticeships across the Council and provided specific support for groups with barriers to work. ○ Employed 49 apprentices and 10 graduates. Supported Care experienced young people through 5 paid traineeships as well as mentoring and support via the Care2work scheme
Resilient	- Working with Cardiff Capital Region, continued to progress Housing viability gap funding to remediate contaminated land conditions across brownfield sites. Planning consent granted for the former Aberdare hospital site and the applicant has commenced development. However, developers have been unable to progress the remediation of Cwm Coking and Heol y Wenallt sites and reallocation of funding is being explored. - Made existing homes more energy efficient through delivering the affordable warmth strategy. ➢ Delivered the RCT Heating Grant, providing opportunities for residents to make their homes more energy efficient and reduce energy bills. 145 grants were completed with a total value of £513k. ➢ Delivered the RCT Solar Panel Grant, providing funding to residents towards solar panels to make them home more energy efficient and reduce energy bills. 94 grants were awarded with a total value of £103k
Healthier	- Progressed opportunities to develop active travel routes to make it easier to visit town centres, with design work underway for schemes in Aberdare and Pontypridd - Delivered housing solutions to meet people's specific needs, including: ➢ Working with private landlord to develop 10 additional units of Private Rented Sector accommodation for single homeless individuals including those with an offending background. ➢ Remodelled Stori supported accommodation provision to provide emergency temporary accommodation for single homeless women with high support needs. - Provided effective support to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in our communities. ○ 272 of people (76% of those presenting at risk of homelessness) were successfully prevented from becoming homeless. - Continued to support responsible landlords to ensure we have a good quality, affordable private rented sector, and approved a new licensing scheme for Houses of multiple occupation.
More Equal	- Supported and challenged the work of schools to improve pupil achievement and narrow the attainment gap. 6 schools received enhanced support through the Team Around the School protocol during the academic year, with 2 now removed due to improvements in data. - Worked with Central South Consortium to embed the new curriculum, with a focus on improving intelligence gathering on skills development across our schools.

	Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PROSPERITY Priority

More Equal	• Implemented Tranche 4 Step 4 provision (for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties), with schools reporting positive impact, and delivered training and support to schools to address behaviour challenges in the post pandemic period.
	• Delivered year 1 of the Early Years Language Project, with positive impact on increasing capacity for universal and targeted approaches, and a small increase in children achieving age related expectations.
	• Revised ALN Service delivery models to better balance the need for individual case support and whole school approaches, which will now be evaluated for impact.
	• Agreed to open a new 3-19 special school to increase capacity to better meet needs and help pupils attend the special school nearest home:
	  ➢ Improved school attendance rates between the 2022/23 and 2021/22 academic years in both primary and secondary phase. However, there remains considerable challenge particularly in secondary phase and for eligible free school meal learners (*see themes for improvement 22/23*)
	  ➢ Interim data at Key Stage 4 in academic year 22/23 shows there is still a significant gap between pupils in RCT eligible for free school meals and their peers. This gap is reflective of the picture across Wales (*see themes for improvement 22/23)*
	  ➢ There has been a slight increase in the % of Year 11 leavers known not to be in Education, Employment and Training (2.9%). Transitional support workers are supporting Year 10 pupils at risk of becoming NEET on leaving school with CV writing, ambitions, life skills and engagement with relevant services.

Cohesive Communities	• Worked with the private sector to tackle empty and rundown sites and premises in our town centres. Notable completed projects are at the former Black Lion in Aberdare where ground floor space has been transformed into a new Restaurant, former Lloyds Bank in Mountain Ash where new ground floor commercial space with residential accommodation on the upper floors has been created and 38 Hannah Street Porth where a former derelict property has been redeveloped into fully occupied office space. • We continued the preparation of our Local Development Plan, a statutory land use plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf. Formal consultation on the Preferred Strategy took place between February and April 2024, and will now inform the development of the more detailed deposit LDP.

Vibrant Culture & Welsh Language	• Redevelopment of the Muni Arts Centre in partnership with Awen cultural trust, due for completion in summer 2024.
	• The new Welsh language immersion service 'Taith Iaith' has supported 11 learners across 7 schools to integrate into Welsh medium schools, with positive feedback from parents, pupils and teachers.
	  ➢ Of 563 Flying start places offered, 90 (18%) have opted for Welsh medium provision, a notable increase.
	  ➢ There has been a slight decline in % of year 1 learners attending Welsh Medium Education (from 20.16% to 19.31%)

Outcomes, Progress and Challenges to Delivering Our PROSPERITY Priority

Globally Responsible	• Approval has been received for the outline business case for the Net Zero Carbon Primary school for Glyncoch under the sustainable schools challenge, with design development and community engagement underway. The project will utilise green technologies, be tailored to the local community who will input into the design process and provide an active learning zone to teach engineering principles, ecology and land management.

'Delivery in Action'

- 61 Childcare & Early years small capital grants worth a total of £525k awarded, with positive outcomes for settings and children and show in these case studies.
- 110 pupils without a clear career focus were supported through the Green Light project, with 93 securing positive destinations in Education Employment or Training following the project, and 30 also improving their school attendance as a result.
- Supported homeless clients in temporary accommodation through the new diversionary activity team, as illustrated in this case study where a client was supported as part of an integrated approach to supporting complex needs.

A detailed update of progress against our Prosperity Priority can be viewed in our Q4 Performance report.

Our Annual Self Assessment Report

SECTION 2

OUR ANNUAL SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

Overview

The Performance and Governance duties outlined in Part 6, Chapter 1 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 are about strengthening and empowering local government… '*defining principal councils as self-improving organisations through a system based on self-assessment and panel performance assessment*'. Among other things, the Act requires Public Bodies to

- keep performance under review,
- consult on performance; and
- report on performance, producing a self-assessment report in respect of each financial year.

The Act sets out that *'A council must produce a self-assessment report in respect of each financial year. The report must set out its conclusions on the extent to which it met the performance requirements during that year, and any actions it intends to take, or has already taken, to increase the extent to which it is meeting the performance requirements'*. This document aims to deliver this duty.

The Corporate self-assessment is a comprehensive assessment of the organisation and not a detailed assessment of the performance of each service portfolio. The self-assessment aims to provide a platform for assurance and improvement and in doing so help to ensure that we deliver the best outcomes for the residents that we serve.

This is the third self-assessment and we continue to learn and develop our approach from our previous Self-Assessments, the most recent of which was considered by the Joint Consultative Committee in December 2023, the Governance and Audit Committee in December 2023 and by Council in January 2024. We seek to learn from the shared knowledge emerging from other Councils and feedback from Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association and the Council's Independent Regulators. There is no direct reference to the local legacies of the Covid pandemic, but these are still much in evidence in the health and well-being of our residents of all ages.

Within all parts of this self-assessment, we aim to make the best use of the data and information already within the public domain, for example, reports to relevant Council committees, policies, plans and strategies. This approach reduces the repetition of information but provides the evidence required as set out within the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Act requires the Council to keep under review the extent to which it is meeting the 'performance requirements', this is the extent to which:

1. is exercising its functions effectively;
2. is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and
3. its governance is effective for securing the above.

Whilst the Act sets out the duty to undertake and report an annual self-assessment, it does not provide a structure to either the process or the annual report, the Act specifically states that each organisation should determine its own approach. To help us through the process it is useful to understand what

self-assessment means at its simplest level. The following questions help guide us through the process of self-assessment:

1. How well are we doing?
2. How do we know?
3. What and how can we do better?

The framework that the Council has adopted and therefore the structure of our self-assessment is based upon the following areas:

1. Our performance management framework – how it all fits together, with a focus on self-evaluation.
2. An update on the themes that emerged from previous self-assessments.
3. Our assessment of our 'core activities'.
   - This section includes areas where we think we can improve on.

Our Performance Management Framework:

How it all fits together, with a focus on self-evaluation.

SECTION 2a

Our performance management framework – how it all fits together, with a focus on self-evaluation.

Our Corporate Plan sets out the outcomes the Council wants to achieve with the aim of delivering better social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes for our communities. Delivery of the Corporate Plan is underpinned by our Performance Management Framework, the purpose of the framework is to have the arrangements in place to help deliver the intended outcomes, manage our risks and provide accountability for delivery.

Detailed priority plans are in place to support the delivery of our well-being objectives (these are our priorities within our Corporate Plan) and these plans aim to manage the strategic risks to achieving our objectives and contain milestones, actions, and measures. Service delivery plans are also in place, and are supported by a wide suite of Policies, Strategies and working arrangements.

Accountability in respect of delivering the Corporate Plan and managing our resources effectively is delivered through the reporting and scrutiny functions of the Council. To find out why, when and how our performance is monitored, please take a look at the performance section of our website.

To support the Council's performance culture, the Performance Management Framework includes timely and proportionate self-evaluation/assessment at both Service and Corporate levels. Our annual service self-evaluation (SSE) has been in place since 2016. In completing their SSE, services are encouraged to be honest and objective. Officers across the Council are encouraged to strive to deliver the best services within the resources available. The Council considers that effective self-assessment is not a fixed judgment that is completed once each year. It is an ongoing process.

The SSE asks services to be clear about how they are performing, and this is consistent with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. For example, how they are performing, evidence how they know, and identify what they can do to improve.

The SSEs are reviewed and challenge by the Council's Chief Executive during 1-2-1 sessions. This robust and embedded arrangement allows the Chief Executive to hold Officers to account and seeks to identify areas where improvement or focus is needed to continually improve; these areas form the basis of service delivery and priority plans for forthcoming years.

The SSEs also
- Help services to make better decisions, manage risks and provide feedback in respect of the need for and scope of corporate support.
- Demonstrates value for money, potential for service change, spend or efficiencies and identify the impact of new or amended service provision.
- Enables corporate services to identify and prioritise service support needs.

- Provides mechanism/information for 'corporate' monitoring and 'cross-cutting' services with the information they require to compile strategic action plans and statutory reports for the Council e.g.; Welsh Language Standards, Equalities, Socio-economic Duty and Biodiversity Duty comprising our three yearly report to Welsh Government and the accompanying action plan.
- Assist services in providing evidence for audit or inspection and deliver the requirements of relevant legislation.

The SSE model is refreshed annually to ensure it takes account of feedback from services and remains relevant and fit for purpose. Over the years the SSE has been developed so that services can provide information about the Sustainable Development Principle through the five Ways of Working and other cross cutting themes that inform statutory reports.

Twenty-four SSEs were completed by services in autumn 2023. Each completed Evaluation was reviewed, signed off by the relevant Director following engagement with the respective Cabinet Member. The SSEs were then subject to challenge by the Chief Executive.

The finalisation of the Self Evaluations and the Chief Executive challenge meetings were held in the context of the "most stark and painful budget choices for Wales in the devolution era". Despite the challenges and uncertainties, the SSE process continued to be conducted in the spirit of openness and transparency.

These challenge and support meetings continue to be seen as an integral and valuable part of the Performance Management Framework and a positive opportunity to challenge performance, explore service issues and opportunities and gather intelligence on cross cutting issues for the Council.

The Service Self Evaluation continues to identify and consider our more strategic challenges. Key themes from the 2023 process were:

Strengths
1. Successful delivery against our plans across the Council, particularly given the challenging financial and operational circumstances in which the Council is operating.
2. Positive impact of sustained capital investment is very clear, with many high impact and visible projects being successfully delivered.
3. Services' clarity about their priorities for improvement and opportunities for doing so.
4. Value of our Apprentice and Graduate schemes in our workforce.
5. Positive and professional relationships between Officers/Senior Leadership Team and elected Members and Cabinet; providing constructive challenge, support and engagement.
6. Greater evidence of medium to long term planning within services.
7. Generally positive implementation of the post Covid Working Arrangements described in the Operating Model introduced in 2023 together with the Joint Office Accommodation Strategy Workspace Plan: Fit for the Future 2023-2030.

Delivery and Integration
- Combined challenges of managing high expectations for service/project delivery, delivering significant and increasingly transformational change and the ongoing financial challenges.
- Increased demand to meet more complex needs and behaviours across several service areas.
- Further review and understanding of the interdependency of services and the associated resource implications of change.

- Where a more commercial or business-like approach may be beneficial the approach is sensibly, a cautious one.
- Further opportunities to build on digital improvement and capability, particularly around data and intelligence.
- Challenge of effective communication across the organisation, particularly to frontline staff.

Workforce and Capacity
- Service recruitment, retention and succession planning challenges, with SSEs identifying/confirming service need for specific support.
- Need to strengthen Management Development opportunities to better support succession planning.
- Need to build capacity for transformational change, particular in those areas of greatest risk.
- Need for some services to reflect and review organisational structures in the light of new or more diverse responsibilities.
- Organisational benefit of maintaining in-house/specialist roles in specific services.
- Managing change, often at a large scale, is usually handled very well but can be complex and protracted, often due to external factors.

External Influences and Relationships
- Increasing use of grant funding to support service delivery with the requirement for appropriate exit strategies aligned to funding end dates.
- Need to continue to challenge partnerships and collaborative arrangements to ensure they are delivering value and the intended outcomes and impact for our residents and communities.
- Recognition of the impact of wider economic challenges particularly where the Council engages independent service providers, contractors or suppliers.
- The constructive relationships with regulatory bodies and the need to explore the value and risk of external audit and inspection.

These themes are explored further in Section 2c of this report. Following the completion of the SSE challenge meeting, all Service Self Evaluations were made available on the Council's Intranet site for internal reference and use. The themes emerging, including those listed above are used to inform service developments, corporate and other processes and also potential changes to the SSE arrangements in 2024.

More directly, the information contained within the SSEs, and the service priorities emerging, informed the Delivery Plans for each service for 2024/25. These Delivery Plans are subject to 'in service' monitoring. Relevant actions are also included in the Council's Priority Plans, monitored by and reported in the quarterly Performance Reports to Cabinet and thereafter to various Scrutiny Committees.

This Annual Self-Assessment Report provides the opportunity to assess our wider performance requirements as defined in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Update on the themes that emerged from previous Self Assessments

SECTION 2b

Update on the themes that emerged from previous self-assessments

Over the course of our self-assessment journey key themes have been common. These are:

1. Financial Planning and Resilience.
2. Workforce Planning.
3. Cost of Living Crisis.
4. Making RCT Resilient to the challenges of Climate Change.
5. Narrowing the Attainment gap for pupils living in poverty.
6. School Attendance.
7. Modernising and integrating health and social care services and transforming the Council's residential services for children.
8. Continuing to regenerate the town centres and supporting local businesses.
9. Supporting those in housing need.
10. Continue to strengthen our arrangements for service user engagement and participation, particularly the evaluation of outcomes.
11. Further strengthen and articulate our organisational culture and values on equality and diversity and, in doing so, support our on-going arrangements in setting out clear expectations for staff and services.

The themes listed above were taken into account during 2023/24 when we commenced the work to prepare our draft Corporate Plan in readiness for 2024/30. These themes have been used to inform the strategic direction of the Council. Some have a frontline impact such as school attendance and supporting those in need of housing for example. Other themes have an impact on the way that the Council delivers its services – these are known as our 'governance arrangements'. Governance arrangements relate to the way the Council operates, the systems by which it is directed and controlled, such as financial management and workforce planning for example.

The themes listed above are visible within the new Corporate Plan 2024/30 – Working with our Communities, and the following Table aims to show you which well-being objective they fall under, along with the supporting priorities and improvement outcomes. Now that these themes have been aligned to our wellbeing objectives, they will be monitored and reported as part of our quarterly performance management arrangements.

Themes from the previous self-assessments:	How these themes align to our new Corporate Plan for 2024/30:		
	Wellbeing Objective	Supporting priority to the Wellbeing Objective:	Improvement Theme:
Financial Planning and Resilience.	**A Well-Run Council**	Managing our workforce, budgets, land, buildings, fleet and information to maximise our efficiency and make the biggest difference to our communities, nature and the environment.	
Workforce Planning.			
Cost of Living Crisis.	**PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES** - Supporting and empowering RCT residents and communities to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.	Children and young people have the best start in life and can learn and grow safely	Supporting children and young people of all abilities and backgrounds to overcome barriers to learning, including those experiencing poverty, so that they can achieve the best educational outcomes that they are capable of.
		Residents will have access to affordable, good quality and energy efficient homes	Working with partners to enable the supply of affordable and sustainable homes across our communities, including supporting those people who are homeless and bringing empty properties back into use.
			Enabling more people to live in warm and energy efficient homes to improve their health and wellbeing and enable them to live more sustainably.
	WORK AND BUSINESS - Helping to strengthen and grow RCT's economy.	Supporting people into rewarding career pathways, skilled and secure work	Supporting people experiencing 'in work' poverty to find more rewarding and secure work
Making RCT Resilient to the challenges of Climate Change.	**NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT** - A green and clean RCT that improves and protects RCT's environment and nature.	Protecting and enhancing the natural environment.	Protecting, supporting and working with nature to tackle both the Climate and Nature emergencies
			Protecting existing trees and expanding woodland natural regeneration and urban tree planting
			Reducing carbon emissions and increasing carbon capture and nature by rewetting and restoring our peat bogs

Themes from the previous self-assessments:	How these themes align to our new Corporate Plan for 2024/30:		
	Wellbeing Objective	**Supporting priority to the Wellbeing Objective:**	**Improvement Theme:**
Making RCT Resilient to the challenges of Climate Change.	**NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT** - A green and clean RCT that improves and protects RCT's environment and nature.	Protecting and enhancing the natural environment.	Improving air quality including through traffic management, encouraging the use of low carbon travel options and implementing the requirements of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Act 2024
			Managing public sector land to support sustainable projects including producing 'green energy', storing carbon, managing flood risk and increasing biodiversity and community food growing.
		Using Natures Assets to benefit people and communities	Making best use of natural and sustainable solutions to reduce flood risk and pollution and manage surface water
			Continuing to invest in solar energy across our schools and Council buildings and also developing energy generation through solar, wind, hydro-electric and geothermal/mine water, to heat and cool homes and businesses
	A Well-Run Council	Reducing the Council's Carbon Footprint	
Narrowing the Attainment gap for pupils living in poverty.	**PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES** - Supporting and empowering RCT residents and communities to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.	Children and young people have the best start in life and can learn and grow safely	Helping children of all abilities and backgrounds to do the very best they can in school by ensuring that we have a relentless focus on securing continuous school improvement and high standards in our schools.
			Ensuring access to timely intervention and advice so that the needs of learners and their families are identified swiftly and early intervention provided.
			Providing great learning environments through our new and improved early years settings and schools including a new Special school and making Welsh medium education accessible to all.
			Supporting children and young people of all abilities and backgrounds to overcome barriers to learning, including those experiencing poverty, so that they can achieve the best educational outcomes that they are capable of.

Themes from the previous self-assessments:	How these themes align to our new Corporate Plan for 2024/30:		
	Wellbeing Objective	Supporting priority to the Wellbeing Objective:	Improvement Theme:
School Attendance.	**PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES** - Supporting and empowering RCT residents and communities to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.	Children and young people have the best start in life and can learn and grow safely	Supporting children and young people of all abilities and backgrounds to overcome barriers to learning, including those experiencing poverty, so that they can achieve the best educational outcomes that they are capable of.
Modernising & integrating health & social care services & transforming the Council's residential services for children.		Residents can take care of their health & well-being so they can live healthy, independent, and fulfilling lives.	Helping our residents to keep healthy, active and well; fulfilling their potential and strengthening local communities through opportunities to participate in learning, leisure, physical and creative activities that are accessible to all.
			Implementing the five-year Health Determinate Research Collaboration in order to tackle health inequalities in RCT and address wider health determinants that directly affect the life chances of our residents.
			Enabling people to be engaged in resilient communities, strengthening connections between community groups, providing opportunities to lead and influence community developments and be involved in volunteering.
		Safeguarding our most vulnerable residents of all ages, providing protection, care and support when they need it most so that they can maximise their potential.	Enabling people to live independently in their community and close to home by providing the right support and care at the right time.
			Providing modern accommodation that meets the needs of people who can no longer live at home.
Continuing to regenerate the town centres & supporting local businesses.	**WORK AND BUSINESS** - Helping to strengthen and grow RCT's economy.	Supporting businesses to prosper and be sustainable	Enabling businesses to find the right advice and support to help them modernise, be sustainable and take advantage of new opportunities and emerging markets

Themes from the previous self-assessments:	How these themes align to our new Corporate Plan for 2024/30:		
	Wellbeing Objective	**Supporting priority to the Wellbeing Objective:**	**Improvement Theme:**
Continuing to regenerate the town centres & supporting local businesses.	**WORK AND BUSINESS -** Helping to strengthen and grow RCT's economy.	Supporting businesses to prosper and be sustainable	Building on our natural landscape and heritage to promote new tourism opportunities in the County Borough and support sustainable growth in the sector
			Working with Higher and Further Education, business and the third sector to share knowledge and support business innovation and sustainability
		Thriving town centres	Delivering regeneration projects to enable vibrant town centres and good quality public spaces where businesses thrive and people want to visit
			Taking opportunities to develop high quality public spaces and enhance existing town centre areas as part of our town centre strategies, which includes tree planting and other sustainable green spaces that support improved health, well-being and increased biodiversity
Supporting those in housing need.	**PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES -** Supporting and empowering RCT residents and communities to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.	Residents will have access to affordable, good quality and energy efficient homes	Working with partners to enable the supply of affordable and sustainable homes across our communities, including supporting those people who are homeless and bringing empty properties back into use.
Continue to strengthen our arrangements for service user engagement & participation, particularly the evaluation of outcomes.	**A Well-Run Council**	Good Governance & Local Democracy - Regulation, Compliance & Governance	
		Involvement & Engagement - Applying the 5 Ways of working	
Further strengthen & articulate our	**A Well-Run Council**	Good Governance & Local Democracy - Regulation, Compliance & Governance	
		Involvement & Engagement - Applying the 5 Ways of working	

Themes from the previous self-assessments:	How these themes align to our new Corporate Plan for 2024/30:		
	Wellbeing Objective	**Supporting priority to the Wellbeing Objective:**	**Improvement Theme:**
organisational culture & values on equality and diversity &, in doing so, support our on-going arrangements in setting out clear expectations for staff & services.	**A Well-Run Council**	Managing Our Finances, Assets & Resources - Our Budget, Land, Buildings, Fleet and Information	
		Diversity, Inclusion and Welsh Language	

More detail in respect of how these areas were managed during 2023/24 can be found **here**.

Our Assessment of Core Activities

SECTION 2c
Our Assessment of our 'core activities'

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act contains a core set of activities common to the corporate governance of public bodies. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 suggests that we use these as a framework for our self-assessment. However, the Council considers that there are additional activities that also need to be assessed.

The following section of this report is structured around this list of core activities; those that are considered as the core activities as defined by the WFG have been marked with an asterisk for clarity:

1. **Strategic planning and Approach***
2. **Governance and Scrutiny**
3. **Finance, Performance and Risk Management***
4. **Human Resources/Workforce Planning***
5. **Asset Management***
6. **ICT and Digital**
7. **Procurement and Commissioning***
8. **Partnerships**
9. **Involvement, Engagement and Customer Feedback**
10. **Welsh Language**
11. **Equalities and Socio-economic Duty**
12. **Regulators' Feedback**
13. **Net Zero**
14. **Corporate Safeguarding**

These areas of work set and support the strategic direction of the Council, they help to ensure the Council has a sound structure of governance, accountability, decision making and legal compliance. It is important to note that all services, whether they are frontline or back-office / support services, form key components of the Council and are all subjected to annual service self-evaluations and delivery planning. All services across the Council continually strive to improve and make the best and most efficient use of resources.

The following section of this report explores these core activities and evaluates how effective they have been and, where relevant, sets out areas for improvement. Those themes that emerged from the service self-evaluations (Section 2a) have also been taken into account.

1. Strategic Planning and Approach

The Council's strategic vision, priorities and challenging targets continue to be set out in our Corporate Plan. Our Corporate Plan sets the direction for our work and directs the Council's resources e.g. our budget, our workforce and its development, our assets and information to where people have told us will make the most difference to their lives both now and in the future. All Council's Strategies and Policies reflect the Corporate Plan and how they contribute to delivering the Council's priorities, examples include:
- Council's Workforce Plan 2023-28
- Tourism Strategy 2021
- Library Strategy 2022-25
- Public Participation Strategy
- Revised Draft LDP 2022-37 Preferred Strategy

From 2020 – 2024, our Corporate Plan was 'Making A Difference' setting out our three Priorities PEOPLE, PLACES and PROSPERITY. 2023/24 was a transition year for the Council as we took steps to engage with residents and stakeholders and to develop and put in place a new Corporate Plan to take effect from April 2024. The new Corporate Plan 2024-30, 'Working with our Communities' was agreed by Council in April 2024. The new Corporate Plan emphasises the need to build community resilience and capacity, so people are better placed to take responsibility for their own well-being recognising the need for the Council to continue to reshape and redesign its services to meet the significant operational and financial challenges ahead.

To ensure a timely transition to the new Corporate Plan in 2024, a comprehensive update of progress since the introduction of 'Making A Difference' was contained with Section 2 of our 2022/23 Annual Self-Assessment approved by Council in January 2024. The 'Progress on our Corporate Plan 2020-24' section concluded that '*Despite the unprecedented challenges experienced by us all since we introduced our Plan, looking back at our progress since 2020 we are able to evidence that we have delivered most of what we set out to achieve'.* The Assessment also set out where we had not made as much progress as we had planned and this work has been considered in the context of the new Corporate Plan.

The new Corporate Plan was developed over an eighteen-month period, by considering the 5 Ways of Working that help to demonstrate we are delivering the sustainable development principle i.e.
1. **Looking ahead** at our challenges and opportunities. We used the best data and information available and sought advice about how we consider the challenges and opportunities ahead. There is uncertainty about the long term, but our Plan includes some of the information we have used to inform our objectives and to safeguard the future.
2. **Involving** local people, a range of stakeholders and Councillors in shaping our Plan. We have been listening to and hearing what our residents of all ages, communities, partners, and staff are telling us what matters to them. This will continue as we develop future actions over the life of the plan. We also looked at information and feedback from a range of surveys, engagement events and ongoing conversations held across our services over the previous eighteen months so that we made best use of the information available.

3. **Working with others** where we can and continuing to seek further opportunities as we implement the Plan over the coming years. Our Plan contains our commitments to working with our partners and some examples of where we are already working with others.
4. Considering the national drivers and the work of other organisations so that we **integrate** and complement work and not contradict or duplicate it. These drivers include Welsh Government requirements and those of our local and regional partners and also the various interconnected and statutory partnerships in place. Over the life of the plan, we will continue to look at who is best placed to deliver what our communities need.
5. We looked at how we can **prevent** problems from occurring or getting worse across each of our Well-being Objectives as we prepare for the future. A good example of this is working with partners to help to keep people well and reduce inequalities in health so that they are at less risk of disease and ill health.

Our strategic processes, including how we use our resources are driven by the Corporate Plan and continue to be key to the Council's ability to meet and demonstrate how it meets the performance and governance requirements set out in Part 6 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

We have further strengthened the synergy between our priorities and the requirement to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of RCT and Wales through our new Corporate Plan 'Working with our Communities'. Our new Plan sets out our four Well-being Objectives and the priorities that will set the strategic direction for all the Council's Strategies, Policies and budget setting etc. over the next six years to 2030. The new Corporate Plan also includes a section in respect of the how the operates, this is called a 'Well Run Council'. The new Corporate Plan was agreed by Council at its meeting on 24 April 2024 following wide ranging engagement with stakeholders.

The new Corporate Plan comes at a time of significant pressure on public finances and pressure on our statutory and discretionary services, and it will not be possible to deliver the plan without changing the way in which the Council operates. We need to transform our services and ensure that our communities are engaged in this process. This will be a challenge, but one that the Council must embrace (and invest in with staffing resources) to deliver change and deliver the best possible services to those that need them. A key aspect of delivering transformational change will be to review the data that the Council holds, we need to use data effectively to inform decision making. We will also need to research and see what others are doing.

The Council's strategic planning arrangements are well-embedded and have provided the foundation for delivery. We have engaged with a wide range of people and groups when we developed our new Corporate Plan 2024/30. But we know that we have significant challenges ahead.

A. **We need to use the new Corporate Plan 2024/30 as a springboard for further innovation and delivery of more targeted and efficient services. This means continuing to consider all options and opportunities, researching what others are doing and deliver on-going service transformation.**
B. **We need to build further capacity to support transformational change, particularly in frontline service areas experiencing sustained high levels of demand.**

C. **We need to reflect on how our services work together where similar roles are discharged and consider structural changes to our workforce where required. This will help us to deliver better outcomes and be more effective and efficient.**

D. **We need to increase the use of data and turn this into meaningful information, whether this is how we compare with others or to inform how services could be changed (i.e. learn from others) to deliver services more effectively and efficiently. This will also support on-going effective scrutiny.**

2. Governance & Scrutiny

Governance

The Council's strong governance arrangements underpin all that we do. Having in place robust systems of accountability, control, policies, and procedures that manage risk effectively form the foundation upon which we can deliver our priorities.

A review of the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements is undertaken each year and in accordance with the 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016)'. The review culminates in an Annual Governance Statement. The Annual Governance Statement for 2023/24 was prepared and reported to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting held on 25th June 2024.

The Annual Governance Statement concluded:
Based on the review of effectiveness against the Local Code of Corporate Governance, the governance arrangements in place provided the basis to maintain the Council's financial stability and resilience, during a period of significant financial pressures and constrained funding, through robust planning, prioritisation and management of scarce resources. This position was underpinned by sound scrutiny and decision-making processes and well-established self-assessment arrangements and supported the delivery of Corporate Plan priority areas and wider services.

A small number of proposals for improvement were made to further strengthen existing processes. The proposals for improvement will be monitored by the Governance and Audit Committee, in accordance with their terms of reference.

Scrutiny

The Council's scrutiny arrangements focus on supporting sound decision making and contributing to the optimisation of intended outcomes, as set out in the Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24.

This included:

• A focus on pre-scrutiny - Scrutiny Committees considering 17 pre-scrutiny reports that provided opportunity to identify risks and opportunities early in the decision-making process and help ensure choices are well informed. Examples of pre-scrutiny were: the draft Revenue Budget Strategy; the draft Corporate Plan; Estyn's Report on Education Services in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council; Day Services for Older People service change proposal; Houses in Multiple Occupation Additional Licensing Review; and the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy and Action Plan (LFRMS).

• Utilising the 'call-in' mechanism - enabling an examination of decisions made by Cabinet but not yet implemented, this being a key part of the Council's governance arrangements, call-in reports were considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee during the year.

- Considering and responding to consultations - providing an independent review and analysis of proposals, policies and recommendations, for example, Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Bill and Council Tax Reform.
- Scrutinising the Council's financial performance, progress to deliver Corporate Plan priorities and actions taken to mitigate strategic risks, and making recommendations to further improve arrangements, for example, revisions to the strategic risk register to align risks and mitigating actions more clearly. We know that we need to improve the way that we report how our services have had an impact on our communities, and this is something that we will work to address.

The above arrangements were supported by on-going training made available for all elected Members on scrutiny committees. The Annual Members' Survey completed in April 2023 provided valuable insight into strengths of support and opportunities for further development. The annual programme of Personal Development reviews that further informs and supports individual Member development took place between April and June 2023. The Members' Development Programme for 2023-24 emerging from these reviews was agreed at a meeting of Democratic Services on 5 July 2023.

A Member Research facility and pre-meetings to assist Chairs and Vice-Chairs in determining questioning / lines of enquiry at scrutiny meetings was also in place. Through the pre-meeting arrangements, due regard was given to the extent of the seven wellbeing goals and the five ways of working (as per the Well-being of Future Generations Act) within reports, directing scrutiny committees to consider the long-term impact of decisions on communities to prevent consistent issues such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

Key developments in 2023/24 included:
1. The relocation of the Council's headquarters to Pontypridd as part of the Council's Office Accommodation Strategy demonstrated the leadership to deliver this strategy. Managing and implementing the changes to the office space and technology, including webcasting furniture, to Llys Cadwyn, involving and keeping Members abreast of changes and implications of the changes.
2. Raising the profile of the importance of Democracy and Participation through
   - RCT specific Social Media campaign during Wales national Democracy Week 16-20 October.
   - The implementation of the Public Participation Strategy following agreement by Council in October 2023.

   It is too early to establish the impact of these initiatives, but they will also be considered in the light of the move of the Council Headquarters to 2 Llys Cadwyn as part of the Office Accommodation Strategy-Workspace Plan: Fit for the Future agreed by Cabinet in May 2023.
3. Further strengthening the work programmes for Committees to ensure these are achievable and can demonstrate clearer outcomes and impact of their work.
4. Resuming earlier work to embed the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 into the democratic processes. This included two online training sessions delivered by the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner to elected Members and some senior officers: one session held in January and the other in February 2023.
5. Re-establishing formal relationships with the Council's recognised Trades Unions by resuming meetings of the Joint Consultative Committee the first of which included consideration of the Council's Self-Assessment and the Council's draft Corporate Plan 2024-30.

More generally the viewing data for live streaming and webcasts identifies an increase in user engagement suggesting greater interest with the democratic processes and/or users seeking timely information available through the visibility of consideration of Council business, including high profile issues. This is despite less webcasting opportunities during November 2023 to February 2024 due to the decommissioning of the Council Chamber and transition to Llys Cadwyn.

Engagement	Municipal Year 2023/24	Municipal Year 2022/23
Total views	12,922	11,259
Live views	2,461	1,631
Total watch time	113d 7h 36m 21s	84d 15h 27m 47
Average watch time	12m 38s	10m 49s
Times shared	32	38
Most viewed total	Cabinet 20 November 948 total views	Cabinet 22 June 628 Total views
Most viewed live	Cabinet 18 September 235 live views	Planning and Development Committee 118 Live views

We have made progress in respect of implementing a Digital Voting (DV) platform, but further work is needed. Whilst Digital Voting is available for those Members that are physically located within the Chamber, we have not got a fully hybrid voting system yet.

We have reviewed the Members' Portal to ensure it remains fit for purpose and enables greater Member interaction with the information and resources it contains to assist them in their roles and the associated administration. Elected Member Champions are working with Officers to achieve a more relevant, workable and accessible tool.

Further detail can be found in the Council Business Unit and Communications and Engagement Service Self Evaluations.

The Council's governance and scrutiny arrangements (including Member development) are considered to be good. Areas for improvement are:

   A. **Through our reporting arrangements we need to better demonstrate the impact that we are having on our communities.**
   B. **We need to increase the use of data and turn this into meaningful information, whether this is how we compare with others or to inform how services could be changed (i.e. learn from others) to deliver services more effectively and efficiently. This will also support on-going effective scrutiny.**

3. Financial Planning, Performance and Risk Management

Financial Planning

The Council updated its MTFP and was reported to Cabinet and full Council in September 2023 and overviews reported to the School Budget Forum on 28th September 2023 and Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 13th December 2023, providing opportunity for scrutiny and stakeholder understanding of the Council's forecasted financial position, risks and opportunities.

The Council's MTFP updates have consistently supported:

- The identification of future forecasted budget gaps (taking account of estimated expenditure requirements and funding levels) that have accurately informed savings requirements and supported a sustainable and targeted programme of improvement and investment.
- An on-going assessment and public reporting and scrutiny of reserve levels, including a detailed overview of the Council's reserves reported to full Council alongside the MTFP update on 20th September 2023. The sustainable approach to the replenishment and utilisation of the Council's earmarked reserves has enabled continued additional one-off investment in Corporate Plan priority areas; for 2023/24 this totalled £27.022Million and were agreed by full Council on 20th September 2023 (£7.730M) and 6th March 2024 (£19.292M). The additional one-off investment, along with other allocated resources, contributed to capital expenditure investment of £169M for 2023/24.
- The setting and delivery of balanced revenue budgets.

The consistent delivery of the above outcomes provides assurance on the robustness of the arrangements in place and a demonstrable commitment to prioritise resources to Corporate Plan areas.

The new Corporate Plan comes at a time of significant pressure on public finances and pressure on our statutory and discretionary services, it will not be possible to deliver the plan without changing the way in which the Council operates. We need to transform our services and ensure that our communities are engaged in this process. This will be a challenge, but one that the Council must embrace (and invest in with staffing resources) to deliver change and deliver the best possible services to those that need them. A key aspect of delivering transformational change will be to review the data that the Council holds, we need to use data effectively to inform decision making. We will also need to research and see what others are doing.

The Council's financial management arrangements are well-embedded and have provided the foundation for delivery. In light of the current pressures on public finances we know that we have significant challenges ahead. The areas for improvement set out within Strategic Planning and Approach, namely points A, B and C, also relate to Financial Planning.

Performance

The Council's Corporate Plan 2020-24 sets out how the Council's priorities/Well-being objectives contributed to the seven national Well-being Goals during 2023/24. The new Corporate Plan was agreed by Council in April 2024. The Performance Management arrangements embed the delivery of the Sustainable Development principles into the self-evaluation, planning, in year and end of year performance and strategic risk reporting processes through a pragmatic and proportionate approach. We are continuing to make more and better use of the range of organisational data, information and digital capacity to strengthen decision making and strengthening the implementation of the

Sustainable Development principles so that they are consistent across all the Council's services and projects. Further information can be found in the Sustainable Development Section of this report).

In May 2023 an Internal Audit report on the Performance Management arrangements concluded that there was 'generally sound system of governance, and risk management and control in place….' The report contained one low risk recommendation in respect of the Involvement Strategy. The outcome of the audit were considered by Governance and Audit Committee in July 2023. The findings were consistent with our own assessment as set out in our previous Self-Assessment and Self Evaluations.

As part of national work conducted by Audit Wales, the Council was also subject to a review of *'Use of Performance information - service user perspective and outcomes'*. The local report and our response was considered by Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting on 24 January 2024. The Audit conclusion indicated that '*performance information provided to senior leaders does not generally enable them to understand the service user perspective and the outcomes of the Council's activities.'* This finding is broadly in keeping with the Council's own findings set out in the Council's annual Self-Assessment for 2021/22 and more recently the 2022/23 Self-Assessment considered by Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting in December 2023 and by Council in January 2024. The work to strengthen and widen the focus and visibility on the impact of our work is continuing, particularly in respect of the new Corporate Plan. We know that we need to improve the way that we report how our services have had an impact on our communities, and this is something that we will work to address. This work will also take into account the review undertaken by Audit Wales in respect of '*Application of the Sustainable Development Principle*'.

Our new Corporate Plan is clear that our Well-being Objectives and priorities '*can only be delivered by a well-run Council. By this we mean a Council that has a positive organisational culture, that values its staff, manages its resources sustainably and wisely and looks to continually improve what we do to have the biggest impact for residents'*.

- **The Council's performance management framework provides a robust basis upon which delivery can be monitored, reported and scrutinised. The area for improvement set out within Governance and Scrutiny, namely point A, also relates to Performance.**

Further detail can be found in the Finance and Performance Management Service Self Evaluation

Risk Management

The Council continues its clear approach to managing risk, as set out within its Risk Management Strategy. The Governance and Audit Committee's Terms of Reference includes its purpose in respect of risk, i.e. providing ' …*independent assurance to the Members of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the internal control environment'* and underpinned by specific responsibilities.

The Council's strategic risks are reviewed, challenged and monitored by the Senior Leadership Team and Risk Leads. This includes a formal review of the Strategic Risk Register to ensure the Council's strategic risks are relevant and timely. In this context, the Council's Risk Management Strategy and updated Strategic Risk Register was reported to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee, on 12th October 2023.

During 2023/24, the Strategic Risk Register continued to be formally reviewed, monitored and updated as part of the Council's quarterly Performance Reporting arrangements to Cabinet and various Overview and Scrutiny Committees, with specific updates to Governance and Audit Committee, Quarter 2 update to the most recent meeting on 27th February, can be seen here for illustrative purposes. A new strategic risk register will be required for 2024/25 in line with the Council's new Corporate Plan, the strategic risks to delivering the Corporate Plan will be identified and this will help to inform the actions needed to deliver the Wellbeing Objectives.

An Internal Audit review of the Council's strategic risk management arrangements was undertaken during 2023/24 and concluded *'We reviewed a sample of four risks on the Strategic Risk Register and found that the risk management arrangements for each are robust. A Substantial Assurance opinion has been given.'* The outcome was reported to the Governance and Audit Committee.

A new Risk Management e-learning module has been developed, the module includes a 15-minute video and explains the Council's arrangements and approach to Risk. Full rollout of this toolkit is due to take place during 2024/25.

At an operational level, service risks continue to be monitored and managed by Service Delivery Plan lead officers as part of local performance management arrangements.

The management of risk continues to be an embedded practice across the Council, and this helps the Council to deliver its priorities and services.

The Council's approach to managing risk supports the delivery of the services that our citizens need. A new strategic risk register will need to be developed for 2024/25 to reflect the risks to delivering the new Corporate Plan. No areas for improvement required at this stage.

4. Human Resources/Workforce Planning

Following Cabinet approval in January 2023, work continues to implement the Human Resources Strategy 2023-28 and the more detailed Workforce Plan 2023-28. Together, the strategy and workforce plan set out the strategic pillars and operational themes to be delivered across Council services working together to enable a positive organisational culture, personal development, support and deployment in order to achieve the Council's vision and priorities.

Leadership is clearly an important element of delivering this area of work. The stability and strength of leadership was recognised by staff in a staff survey considered by Senior Leadership Team in November 2023. Of the staff that responded,

- 65% (*down from 75%)* agreed or strongly agreed that RCT is a strong Council that leads the way in many services.
- 27% (*up from 19%*) neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 7% (*up from 5%*) in total, either, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Whilst we are not complacent, these findings continue to provide some assurance that staff see strong leadership across its Managers and Members. This will be further tested as the Council tackles the financial challenges ahead and we will continue to develop and deliver this strong and visible leadership.

Progress against the four aims contained within the Strategy noted above is summarised below:

Aim 1: Responsible, Inclusive and Sustainable Leadership and management to deliver priorities
A review of leadership and management courses has been undertaken and improvements made to existing courses to meet organisational needs as well as introduction of new training. For example carrying out effective 1-2-1 and performance reviews. Managers briefings have been maintained and support continues to assist managers in embedding Welsh language within their service areas.

There have been some delays with data work streams in terms of making workforce data more accessible to managers and work is underway to improve and facilitate system reporting mechanisms, which is necessary to support work across all the aims of the strategy, and for developing more effective benchmarking with other organisations.

Aim 2: High Performing, Engaged and Dedicated Workforce
Existing mechanisms to supporting learning have continued, complemented by sourcing of externally funded training such as BSL (British sign language), project management.

Feedback from staff indicated that communication could be further improved and this will continue to be addressed, including through the introduction of a staff newsletter.

The Corporate individual performance review process was formally re-introduced across the Council, with flexibility for service specific approaches where these add value. Bespoke support was available from HR for areas with specific challenges. iTrent records currently show compliance rates of 59% across the Council. There may be an element of underreporting due to managers failing to log reviews on the system. Reasons for manager non-compliance included lack of time/capacity and service change. Service areas with lowest compliance will be targeted for HR support. Staff and manager feedback from those who completed the process was mostly positive, and improvements have been made based on identified areas. For 23/24 the focus has been on compliance, however over time this will shift to supporting services to realising additional benefits such as team training analysis and succession planning.

Roll out of further functionality of the [iTrent](#) system continued, including self-service for annual leave for ICT users. Roll out to non ICT users continues to progress in 24/25. There are aspects / functions of the iTrent system that are not yet fully utilised, and we must look to review the full use of the system to make maximum use of functionality, this will improve the data that we hold which will then enable us to use the data to monitor compliance with key requirements around training for example.

Aim 3: Recruiting and Retaining Staff for Excellent Service Delivery
We continue to develop our employee brand, expand our advertising (e.g. via expanded webpages and use of LinkedIn) and undertaking tailored interventions to support recruitment and retention to meet specific needs, although a reduction in resources has limited the extent of bespoke work. for example:
- The Children's Services workforce strategy continues to be delivered with support from a dedicated officer, including targeted social media. To support retention, exit interviews and onboarding interviews are now embedded into practice in Children's and Adult's Services.
- Our [website](#) has also been developed for those that are looking for career opportunities in our schools.

A review of recruitment processes is currently underway to identify areas where processes can be improved, streamlined and expediated.

The Council continues to challenge and strengthen its procedures regarding recruitment, retention and training of Welsh speaking staff, with a guaranteed interview scheme for level 3+ Welsh speakers if essential skills are met.

In addition to effective recruitment and retention, the current financial climate is see us do more (or the same) with less people. We will need to review our succession planning arrangements so that we ensure that we have staff in posts that can deliver for us.

Aim 4: Maximising Attendance and Supporting Staff Wellbeing
New hybrid working arrangements approved by Cabinet in May 2023 were introduced in September 2023. 'Fit for the Future' our Workspace Plan' and the Operating model and Working Arrangements Policy integrate the approaches to workforce, accommodation and digital to provide staff with fit for purpose facilities which support service delivery. A digital solution has been piloted at Llys Cadwyn, to implement the necessary digital tools to compliment hybrid working arrangements (online meeting room bookings for example). Further work is planned to roll out this approach across other sites.

A workforce well-being strategy is under development to support a healthier and more resilient workforce, which is due to be presented to SLT for approval during 2024/25. Work is also underway to refine occupational health support and to implement an Avoidable Employee Harm approach (AEH) to staff in the context of conduct cases.

Further detail can be found in the Human Resources Service Self Evaluation.

The Council's Human Resources Service provides a key function to all services across the Council. Areas for improvement are:
  A. **We need to continue to focus HR expertise on those Service Areas that have identified recruitment and retention as a key risk.**
  B. **We need to build on the progress made to date to implement the iTrent system (i.e. the integrated Payroll and HR System). This will allow for a wider suite of data to be accessed and reviewed to measure compliance by our managers, for example, personal development reviews and training take-up.**
  C. **We need to continue to develop our succession planning arrangements to support medium to long term service planning and resilience.**

5. Asset Management
The property estate of the Council comprises approximately 2,359 land and building assets valued at £885m (at Mar-24, subject to audit) and includes schools, libraries, depots and waste disposal sites, cemeteries, crematoria, homes for the elderly people, theatres, and investment property. In addition to our built assets, given the range of services delivered by the Council, it operates a diverse and large number of vehicles. More than 400 vehicles are in use.

The most recent update of the progress of our Corporate Asset Management Plan was considered by Cabinet on 20th November 2023. A new Corporate Asset Management Plan for 2024-2030 has been developed during 2023/24 and is scheduled for consideration by Cabinet in Autumn 2024, following the adoption of the Council's new Corporate Plan in April 2024. The new Corporate Asset

Management Plan will demonstrate how it will support the delivery of the Council's Well-being Objectives and how through the management of the Council's land and property estate over the next 6 years, it will contribute to a 'Well run Council' including *managing our workforce, budgets, land, buildings, fleet and information to maximise our efficiency and make the biggest difference to our communities, nature and the environment*. The Corporate Asset Management Plan will also continue to more clearly consider the Sustainable Development principle to drive and shape its assets following the findings emerging from the Audit Wales report 21-22 Springing forward – Strategic Asset Management, with an update on recommendations provided to Governance & Audit Committee in July 2023. The Corporate Asset Management Plan is informed / underpinned at service level through Service Asset Management Plans.

- The Corporate Asset Management Plan will form a strategic driver to help the Council to review and potentially re-design its services. A clear priority and challenge for the Council will be to ensure that it has the right assets in the right place to help deliver effective and efficient services. Transformational change will be needed to deliver the new Corporate Plan and utilising our assets effectively will be key to helping us deliver.

The Council has made good progress with the implementation of our Office Accommodation Strategy Workspace Plan: Fit for the future 2023-2030 approved by Cabinet in May 2023 to make better use of our physical assets to meet the needs of a changing organisation as we respond to the needs of our residents and communities. We are also continuing our work to decarbonise our energy use, estate and fleet through our Decarbonisation Plan, the most recent update for which was considered by the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee in November 2023.

More widely we are also continuing to develop the community use of our schools and continuing to make land and buildings available and sustainable for community use and striving to maximise social value through Community Asset Transfers through the RCT Together initiative. Community Asset Transfers enable our communities to own and/or manage facilities that may be surplus to Council need or may otherwise be closed down or disposed of. As part of this work, the process aims to maximise social value i.e. the value of importance that people place on the positive changes they experience in their lives. Examples of successful Community Asset Transfers demonstrate the range of activity across the County Borough. Information relating to Community Asset Transfers is available on the Council's Community Asset Transfer webpage and includes current opportunities for the transfer of land and buildings.

Key deliverables in respect of us managing our assets:
- Relocated the Council's Civic Headquarters and Council Chamber to 2 Llys Cadwyn, Pontypridd, providing greater accessibility for residents and staff by public transport and generating/increasing footfall in the Town Centre and helping to support local business. This has also allowed for the Clydach Vale site to be vacated to accommodate a new school.
- Completing the refurbishment and remodelling of offices in Ty Elai transforming the work environment.
- Progressing work to rationalise other office accommodation and deliver value for money, including Rock Grounds, Aberdare; Rhondda Principle Social Services Office, Tonypandy; Ty Sardis, Pontypridd; and Ty Trevithick, Abercynon.
- Continuing to reduce the office accommodation (OA) footprint. 2023/24 OA footprint has exceeded the baseline target set of 20% reduction by 2020, with a reduction of 30% in 2023/24. We remain on track to reduce the gross internal area (GIA) floor space by 43% by 2027, as stated in the Office Accommodation Strategy Workspace Plan: Fit for the future 2023-2030.

- Energy consumption results in significant revenue costs for the Council. Work commenced during 2023/24 to review those sites with the highest energy consumption. The aim was to review all consumption and establish energy reduction measures. This resulted in good outputs, and work needs to continue into the future, as this not only saves money but it also reduces the Council's carbon footprint.

Further detail can be found in the Corporate Estates Service Self Evaluation.

The Council has a good track record of managing its assets, but we know we have more to do as the way in which we use our assets could be fundamental to the ways in which we transform our services. We need to maximise the use of our assets and ensure that we are using them to deliver the best possible outcomes for our communities. Areas for improvement are:

A. **We need to ensure that we have the right assets in the right place and not be limited by where our assets currently are. The information we hold and refresh on the needs and demands of our residents, now and in the future, will inform this process.**
B. **For all our built assets, we need to ensure they are utilised fully and are run efficiently, supported by our energy consumption monitoring arrangements.**

6. ICT and Digital Service

The Council continues to make strong progress in supporting organisational and service changes through the delivery of its Digital Strategy 2022 – 2026. Our approach supports the delivery of the Council's priorities and is consistent with the requirements as set out within the National Digital Strategy for Wales.

The Digital Strategy, agreed by Cabinet in March 2022, delivers the Council's Vision of being a 'Digitally Driven Council', and comprises four work streams:

1. Digital Solutions and Service Design
2. Data Insight and Intelligence
3. Digital Skills, Learning and Inclusion
4. Digital Infrastructure

We are currently developing a mid-term update report of our progress in delivering our strategy and strengthening its governance, reporting and scrutiny arrangements.

In the meantime, examples of how the strategy themes are being delivered include:

1. **Digital Solutions and Service Design**

Continuing to use digital solutions to increase digital self-service, improve customer digital experience, reduce administrative burden, automate workflow and mobilise our workforce. This work aims to maximise resources through more efficient and streamlined processes and access to services. Projects include Contact Centre solutions integrated with the GOSS Digital CRM Platform, to improve online services for residents and back-office systems for staff. The new Digital Platform will enable improved resident experience, through new integrated technology that will form the Council's digital 'front door,' providing access to Council Services. Delivery Plan for 2024/25 will seek to further technologies such as telephony, email, webchat, BOTs, Artificial Intelligence and online forms that trigger automated processes via Robotic Process Automation (RPA).

Key to this work being successful is the accuracy of the information that is held on our website. We know some parts of our website either have gaps or some information is not up to date. This is particularly relevant where we are looking to increase digital self-service, improve customer digital experience and investigate the rollout of artificial intelligence in our customer interactions. Whilst we have begun to review the possibilities that artificial intelligence can deliver for us, some Council's appear to have made further progress (Derby Council for example), we must meet with and learn from these organisations.

In delivering digital services designed to meet customer needs, our Digital work programme supports the delivery of the Council's Priorities, for example:

- People – progressing the Digital Case Management of Multi Agency Safeguarding and supporting community initiatives e.g. 'Digital Fridays' and Get online in RCT to help more people to develop their skills to understand and access ICT. The introduction of a new digital process allowed efficient administration of Cost of Living Scheme to 8,000 families to ensure the families most in need received easy-to-access and timely financial support.
- Places – implementing digital technology to maximise efficiency for waste collection rounds and supporting the CCTV Service to review and improve data protection compliance across the County Borough. With the support of Welsh Government funding, a county-wide network of LoRaWAN gateways and specific Internet of Things (IoT) sensors were purchased and installed as a means of monitoring footfall and flow of human traffic in town centres to inform future town centre developments. Also, 20 low-cost, easy to install air quality monitoring sensors were purchased and installed in areas of high traffic to monitor pollutant particles and inform future highway and pollution measures.
- Prosperity – Introducing new IT systems and equipment to support digital skills in the new education curriculum and providing free Public Wi-Fi in approximately 90 Council and community buildings and in our seven key Town Centres. A national Empty Homes Grant Scheme system was designed and implemented on behalf of RCT Prosperity Services to administer grants to renovate vacant properties and increase the amount of available housing across RCT and the rest of Wales. A series of grant application processes and triaging tools were also delivered to assist Regeneration teams to administer local and national grants more swiftly and effectively to applicable homeowners to assist them with heating upgrades and other home renovations, without the historical elongated approval process. A new Tourism website was designed and launched, encouraging more visitors to RCT, benefiting Council attractions and local businesses.

2. **Data Insight and Intelligence**
   - Continuing to strengthen our approach to data insight and intelligence at service and corporate levels in order to monitor and scrutinise performance and obtain maximum value from our data: including through the development and use of Data Dashboards. This approach enables services to use data that is timely, accurate, relevant and reliable. For example, identifying missed waste collections and managing flood sensors. Corporately, Financial Management Dashboards as part of service budget books have been developed, and the development phase of the Corporate Plan monitoring Dashboard during 2023/24 will transition into the new Corporate Plan.
   - Piloting 'Internet of Things' (IOT) sensor deployment and data gathering from devices and physical objects to provide information including Footfall, Air Quality, Adult Social Care assisted living and waste management.

3. Digital Skills, Learning and Inclusion

- Ensuring accessibility standards are reviewed and our website adapted accordingly and providing a sensory line for those hard of hearing.
- Upskilling many non-digital staff to utilise technology as part of their roles, providing them with transferrable skills to utilise in their personal lives.
- Continuous development opportunities and support for Elected Members to conduct their interactions with both the Council and constituents via digital solutions.
- Strengthening the development and use of data and associated research and digital capacity and capability to embed the use of data to inform decision making as part of the £5M funded bid from National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) with the aim of reducing Health Equality and improving Well-being. The Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), aims to improve research and analysis capacity and capability within the Council, developing a culture of using data to better inform decisions and future resident health outcomes for our residents.

4. Digital Infrastructure our work includes

- Managing the risks associated with information assets, ensuring that ICT infrastructure is continuously reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose and secure, business processes are GDPR compliant and that cyber assurance activities are monitored, challenged and scrutinised through the Cyber Resilience and Information Management Board.
- Replacing core network Firewalls that provide a more modern platform with greater security features and allow for improved speed of disaster recovery.
- LORAWan network infrastructure to enable the Council to maximise opportunities, including technology pilot of the 'Internet of Things', see also data and intelligence section above.
- Removing and decommissioning 'out of support' infrastructure and supporting key systems.
- Ensuring Cyber Security Resilience by continually working to safeguard, prevent and being prepared to effectively respond to Cyber-attacks. Information Assets and Cyber assurance also feature as Strategic risks monitored in the Council's Strategic Risk Register as part of the Council's quarterly performance report to Cabinet - Risks 6 and 20 refer.

Integral to delivering the strategy is a set of principles which include robust, secure, cyber resilient platforms that protect our data and assets. The Digital Strategy also includes an Appendix which demonstrates how it contributes to the seven National Well-being goals, set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. Locally, processes have been widened to capture the application of the Sustainable Development principle at the point services request Digital Project support, and we are continuing to strengthen our approach as we develop our understanding. We are also using the recently issued Ways of Working Journey Checker to continue to strengthen our approach to applying the SD principle.

During 2023/24, as part of the national audit of Digital Strategies across Wales, RCT Digital Strategy was subject to review by Audit Wales. The key findings were that *"The Council's current Digital Strategy runs from 2022 to 2026 with the strategic ambition of being a truly 'Digitally Driven' Council. The Council drew from a wide range of sources and engaged with a range of advocacy groups to inform its digital strategy but has not directly involved residents in shaping its strategic approach. The Council's Digital Strategy aligns with its own Corporate Plan and priorities and also those of partner organisations. The Council has allocated resources to fund its Digital Strategy. The Council has clear arrangements for monitoring progress in delivering its digital strategy, but it is unclear how it will evaluate its impact and therefore value for money."*. The report contained two recommendations:

- Involvement with stakeholders - To better understand the needs of citizens and the potential barriers to them using digital technology, the Council should involve the full diversity of its citizens in developing its digital strategy.
- Monitoring benefits - To better understand the impact of its digital strategy and the extent to which it is securing value for money the Council should routinely set out the full costs of individual digital projects and how it will assess their impact and the overall impact of its strategic approach.

To further strengthen the governance and implementation of the Digital Strategy during 2023/24, Digital Governance has been aligned with service transformation arrangements, that assist in the identification of opportunities for digital resource prioritisation and improved integration with wider Council plans and strategies.

We are also continuing to progress the development of a Data Strategy to provide a clearer framework about how we manage all aspects of our data. We are currently working with Data Cymru to develop a Data Maturity Audit that meets our needs and those of other Councils across Wales.

We continue to maximise the benefits of local and regional working and partnership working with numerous examples including:
- Actively participating in the 'All Wales Local Government Digital Advisory Group', comprising 22 Councils & Chief Digital Officer, that directly considers collective challenges, shares lessons and agrees digital priorities for collaborative delivery that are designed to maximise resource, minimise duplication and realise multiple benefits.
- Providing Contact Centre services i.e. building, infrastructure and contract centre platform in which CTM staff facilitate daytime bookings and out of hours services to the Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM) Health Board.
- Playing a leading role across Wales in respect of sourcing a replacement for our WCCIS system.
- Working with Merthyr Tydfil CBC for the procurement of a Digital Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC), the ARC being an essential requirement to ensure ongoing service continuity to our lifeline residents as part of the national Digital Switchover.
- Leading the Technical Standards Group (TSG) in the governance and delivery of the Welsh Government funded HWB Schools Digital transformation programme, enabling all County Borough pupils and teaching staff access to online resources.

We know we have more to do to evidence the impact of the work we deliver to our residents, both directly and indirectly through services and with our partners. We are also continuing to strengthen how we capture and assess the impact of our work.

Further detail can be found in the ICT and Digital Service Self Evaluation.

The Council has a good track record of implementing digital change, but we know we have more to do in this fast paced environment. Areas for improvement are:
    A. **We need to continue to change at pace and explore technology such as Artificial Intelligence to support on-going effective and efficient service delivery that meets the needs of our customers / service users. We also need to continue to explore what others are doing and where relevant, learn from them.**
    B. **We need to review our website and ensure that information that is regularly requested is easy to find and accurate, this can help to improve the customer experience and reduce the**

number of calls received by our call centre allowing them to focus on the most important calls. This will also allow our residents to receive the best possible service by 'going online'.

7. Procurement and Commissioning

We are continuing to strengthen our approach to Sustainable Procurement, through our Commissioning, Socially Responsible Procurement and Contract Management Strategy 2021-24. Given the proactive work that has been invested in this area, we are in a good position to adapt to the changes that are on the horizon during 2024/25. Our progress is generally positive, and we continue to strive to maximise the value, including the social value, in our contracts.

We continue to support the delivery of multi-million-pound projects for the Council, as well as preparing for and delivering change in respect of:

- The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023.
- The Procurement Act (replacing the Public Contract Regulations) that are due to come into effect in Autumn 2024.
  - Awareness raising for all Council managers took place in early 2024 with a presentation from Welsh Government Procurement colleagues.
- Embedding and monitoring Social Value in our contracts,
- Tackling the carbon footprint associated with procured good and services,
- Aiming to spend as much with local businesses as possible.

In 2023/24, £232M of the Council's spend was with suppliers across Wales, with 66% of spend (£216m) with suppliers from the CF, SA an NP post codes. Of the total spend, £83m was spent with suppliers from within the County Borough. We know we still have more work to do to understand the local markets and the barriers to tendering for work, and we hope that our local directory will allow for more local businesses to register their details with us.

We are continuing to implement our Commissioning, Socially Responsible Procurement and Contract Management Strategy 2021-24 agreed by Cabinet in March 2022. The strategy and changes to the Council's contracting arrangements are driven by the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 requires Contracting Authorities to *'Seek to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of their areas by carrying out public procurement in a socially responsible way'.* Our Commissioning, Socially Responsible Procurement and Contract Management Strategy also embeds the ten principles set out in the Wales Procurement Policy Statement.

We are continuing to develop and improve our approach to delivering social value, which requires social value measures to be applied to all contracts where the estimated value exceeds £75k. In the last year, we have secured commitment from our suppliers to deliver 382 social value outcomes.

Examples of the Social Value achievements from contractors in 2023/24 include:

Economic
- 131 Full Time Equivalent jobs created and 72 new apprenticeship opportunities created from contracts awarded.
- Over 6,000 weeks of targeted recruitment and training, as well as 1,500 hours of training/support initiatives have been provided by our contractors aimed at creating opportunities for disadvantaged people and skills improvement.

- A commitment to spend £24M with local supply chains during the life of our contracts. To date, £9.7M has already been spent with the local supply chain, further improving the local economy and supporting local businesses.
- Over 3,800 hours and 595 weeks of support targeted at curriculum and education activities have also been delivered.

Environmental
- Over 726 hours and £14k committed, aimed at delivering carbon reduction initiatives, including activities to promote sustainable procurement, and safeguarding the environment.
- For 2 of our 21st Century school building contracts, 95% of the waste has been diverted from landfill and 85% of material recycled.

Social and Cultural
- 966 hours of supporting to community initiatives, including supporting healthier communities, crime reduction, enhancing green spaces and biodiversity.
- £92K donated towards community initiatives and local community groups, such as Trussell Trust food bank donations, sponsorship of local sports teams, food parcels to families in local schools, refurbishment of community group establishments and supporting charities within RCT.
- £90K donation in respect of purchasing educational books/resources to local schools.
- Donating new and used bikes for community groups and schools within RCT.
- Providing health hampers and fruit baskets as well as 'Plant your Patch' packs to encourage growing your own produce.
- Providing refurbished tablets/laptops for use in a community digital sharing scheme.
- 2,056 hours committed to supporting young people who are facing homelessness, volunteering in litter picks and river cleans and providing school talks about Ecology and Biodiversity.

Whilst we have made good progress in respect of our social value arrangements, our reporting focuses on the outputs. We need to further develop the arrangements to show the impact on individuals and our communities.

As part of our work to develop a greater understanding of Social Enterprises in the context of Social Value, we commissioned Cwmpas to establish the scope of Social Enterprises across the County Borough. Using the information emerging from the report, we were able to update the Council's Local Business Directory (LBD) with information in respect of Social Enterprises in the County Borough.

This year the Council has also achieved accreditation as a Real Living Wage Employer. All our Suppliers and contractors are encouraged to pay at least the real living wage to their employees. A clause now exists within contact arrangements that states - '*Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC is an accredited real Living Wage employer. This means that all employees of the Council receive a minimum hourly rate of pay as set by the Living Wage Foundation. This commitment extends to our supply chain and therefore bidders shall ensure that any employees assigned to working on any subsequent contract as a result of this tender shall also receive the living wage as a minimum.* Any supply chain employees that are not in receipt of RLW can also report this through the Council's Whistleblowing Policy where the matter will be investigated. No reports of this nature have been made this year.

In the 2022/23 Carbon Footprint calculation, at 65% of emissions (67% in 2021/22) the procurement of goods and services remains the Council's biggest proportion of the Council's Carbon Footprint. Of these goods and services, Construction, Transportation Services, Social Care Services, Food and Drink and Fleet Services are the highest 'emitters' of CO_2e. The total carbon emissions calculated from these categories amounts to 80.7% of procured goods and services. As a result, these areas are being prioritised for carbon reduction support.

We launched the RCT Carbon Footprint Calculator for businesses in November 2023. The calculator is available for any business to use when calculating their own carbon emissions/footprints. Ten neighbouring Local Authority areas and Natural Resources Wales have also adopted the calculator. We are now targeting the use of the Calculator to those suppliers and contractors that have the highest contracted spend with the Council and so the highest carbon emissions as identified by the calculation methodology. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received training on the Calculator in November 2023 to inform their understanding of the impact of the carbon reduction in local procurement arrangements. Now that our carbon toolkit is live, we need to utilise it with the aim of moving from Tier 1 carbon reporting (which is based upon the amount of money we spend with our suppliers) to Tier 2 carbon reporting (which is a more accurate understanding based upon actual carbon consumed – obtained direct from our suppliers using a toolkit). This is an area that we will need to focus upon during 2024/25 and beyond.

We continue to improve and strengthen the Council's Procurement and Commissioning processes including the implementation of the requirements of the new Procurement Act and Social Partnership & Public Procurement (Wales) Act and embedding our responsibilities to procure in a socially responsible way through effective governance, procurement processes and contract management arrangements.

The Council's procurement and commissioning arrangements are well embedded and we have a good track record of supporting the delivery of contracts, and we have a track record of being innovative (carbon toolkit and social value for example). But we know we have more to do in respect of getting a better understanding of the Council's carbon footprint that is associated with our procured goods and service. Areas for improvement are:
   A. **We need to rollout our carbon toolkit across key contracts with a view to moving from Tier 1 to Tier 2 reporting to Welsh Government.**
   B. **We need to develop our social value reporting to not only show the outputs, but to also show the impact that these are having on individuals and our communities.**

Further information about what is available can be found on the Council's Website and also the Pensions, Procurement and Transactional Services, Service Self Evaluation.

8. Partnerships

The Council continues to build on its positive track record of partnership working and collaborating with others. Examples range from formal regional partnerships like the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal described below; working in local place-based partnerships e.g. working with the Aberdare BID, Social Enterprises, the Aberdare market company and others to develop the Aberdare Town Centre Strategy; and subject specific partnership arrangements e.g. working with Communities for Work and Coleg y Cymoedd to deliver the Jason Mohammad Academy, increasing participant's creative skills and providing opportunities for work experience in TV and Film. We also work with community groups to meet a particular and immediate need, or to bid for and deliver specific time limited grant funded

projects. There are many examples of collaborative arrangements in place within the Council in our [Working with Others](#) page and through [RCT Together](#).

The duty to collaborate is a one of the five Ways of Working that public bodies need to implement to demonstrate they are meeting the Sustainable Development requirements set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. However, we work in partnership because it is the right thing to do to improve outcomes for people and communities and maximise our collective resources. We are keen to ensure that any work with Partners delivers value, outcomes and impacts for our residents and communities.

Our new Corporate Plan 'Working with our Communities' is clear that '*with budgets under pressure and demands on our services increasing we need to develop and manage realistic expectations through a strengthened partnership approach'*. The Plan embeds partnership approaches to delivery throughout the four new Well-being Objectives and the underpinning Priorities. The Plan also sets out our clear commitment to partners….'*We will be committed and active partners in our work with others, seeking and challenging where we can add more and better outcomes for our residents, communities and businesses by working together'*.

[Our Rules of Procedure](#) within the Constitution sets out definition of formal partnerships and the associated responsibilities and controls in place.

The changes to the strategic partnership landscape across our region continues to progress. Some of our major partnership changes include:

- The Cwm Taf and Bridgend Public Services Board (PSB), is continuing to progress the delivery of its [CTM Well-being Plan](#) with the Scrutiny arrangements for the new CTM PSB supported by this Council, see [PSB Scrutiny function](#). The CTM PSB has also commissioned a regional [Climate Change Risk Assessment](#) which, as well as supporting the delivery of the regional Well-being Objective 'Sustainable and resilient local neighbourhoods', will also inform the Council's local work to manage and mitigate Climate and Environmental risks.
- We are strengthening our arrangements in our work as part of the CTM [Regional Partnership](#) Board.
    - The 2023-28 Cwm Taf Morgannwg Area Plan, informed by the [Population Needs Assessment](#) has been implemented by the CTM Regional Partnership Board.
    - Progressing the integration of Health and Social Care has been slower than anticipated. However, a Regional Director is now in place to manage the implementation of the new regional model.
- Proposals for a regional Community Safety Partnership Board were pre scrutinised by the [CTM Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#) at its meeting on 24th February 2024 and the Community Services Scrutiny Committee ([Crime and Disorder](#)) at its meeting on 28th February 2024. A first initial meeting was held on the 2nd July 2024, with a development day scheduled for September 2024, to establish priorities and delivery plan content.
- The transition from the CCRCD to the South East Wales Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) model through the arrangements conferred by Welsh Government on 3rd June 2022 in respect of Strategic Development Planning, Regional Transport Planning and for the promotion of Economic Well-being. Progress in 2023 was delayed by the need to resolve taxation issues. However, two milestones contained within the Transition Plan approved by the South East Wales CJC [on 31 July 2023](#) have now been achieved, i.e.

1. Achieving Operating Status as at 1 October 2023
2. Having a fully functioning status by the end of the 2023/24 Financial Year to enable 'Lift and Shift'

Council received a presentation on the work of the CCRCD, its impact and an overview of its transition arrangements at its meeting on 7 February 2024.

- Pre-decision scrutiny of the draft Constitution of the South East Wales Corporate Joint Committee (SEWCJC) was considered by the CCRCD Joint Overview and Scrutiny on 7 March prior to consideration by the SEWCJC on 18 March 2024. CJCs will be subject to the same performance, governance and scrutiny requirements as its constituent bodies and will need to be determined.

In 2023, we successfully bid for £5M funding from the National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) to establish and lead a new collaboration which, over the next five years, seeks to tackle the wider determinants of health to reduce health inequalities and improve the health of our residents into the future. This Council led Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) comprises Wales Centre for Public Policy, Cardiff University, Cwm Taf University Health Board, Interlink RCT and Public Health Wales. An update report was considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 29 April 2024. The outcome of this work will have a positive impact on how decisions are made by the Council in respect of the research undertaken and the evidence base that will be built to support decisions. It is, however, too early to say how this will materialise.

The Council has a good track record of working in Partnership. We will continue this work and will ensure that these arrangements effectively deliver outcomes that benefit our communities. No areas for improvement identified at this stage.

9. Involvement and Engagement

We have continued to widen and strengthen our engagement, involvement and feedback channels, to find out what matters to people and also to make better use of the information we receive from the various feedback channels to shape and inform service delivery, plans and policy. This entailed talking directly to residents in various locations across RCT, conducting face to face and online surveys and via our online engagement platform 'Let's Talk'.

The 'Let's Talk' platform allows us to collect and analyse information and helps to show what we have done as a result of what people tell us, although we are continuing to strengthen our approach. The platform provides good analytics data for all engagement tools as well as the rates of visits including a breakdown of total visits, informed visits and engaged visits. Using this focussed data has improved our ability to provide information arising from consultation and engagement projects in order to plan future work with a better understanding of successful engagement approaches. Overall, our use of 'Let's Talk' has demonstrated an increase in rates of engagement and site traffic, with the most visited page in 2023-24 being 'Let's Talk Eisteddfod 2024'. The top five most viewed projects this year totalled over 7,000 page views and over 2,000 individual points of engagement.

We have also developed a Data Library to support and coordinate data insights in respect of the County Borough which also supports the Welsh language and Socio-economic Impact Assessments. The Data Library, which utilises PowerBI dashboards, is a central point for Officers and Members to easily access a range of accurate and timely data and information to inform policy and strategy development.

Feedback from our customers, residents, businesses as well as our visitors is valuable to us as we strive to continually improve the services we provide. We have good evidence of using individual feedback to inform service change. However, we also recognise that we need to maximise the strategic value of available data/information more effectively and to establish the difference our work is making to people and communities. This was reinforced by the findings emerging from the Audit Wales report Use of Performance Information: Service User Perspective and Outcomes reported to Governance and Audit on 24 January 2024. Data Cymru has developed a range of PowerBi dashboards that pulls together lots of comparative data for all Council's across Wales. Awareness sessions are planned for 2024/25 by Data Cymru and we will attend these sessions and then establish how this data can be used to inform service changes and also how we compare with others.

The Council values insight from across our communities, as well as digital engagement methods we also provide a free post and telephone option for those who cannot engage digitally. We produce accessible engagement materials, such as easy read versions of our consultation documents e.g. Revised Local Development Plan 2022-2027 – Preferred Strategy.

A key focus of work for involvement and engagement in 2023/24 has been the development of our Corporate Plan 2024/30. The Engagement and Involvement Appendix contained within the report to Cabinet in March 2024, details how we sought to maximise the involvement and engagement of individuals, networks and other stakeholder groups.

- To support engagement and ease of responses, a standard pack of engagement materials was distributed to networks/groups. These materials included a presentation, discussion guide and response form to aid discussion and collection of feedback. All engagement materials were also available through the 'Let's Talk' platform and reinforced by regular Social Media 'comms' which linked directly to the 'Let's Talk' platform.

We have continued to adapt the way that we engage with different resident groups to ensure that we widen our reach to all residents. For example, in response to feedback received through our 'Get Involved' survey with Children Looked After in 2022/23, we have developed an online version of the Social Services Annual Survey questionnaire that can be accessed via a QR code for the first time. We will monitor the impact of this addition to the paper format via our response rates to see if more children and young people complete the survey.

Our plans for 2023/24 included continuing to talk to and involving residents and communities in matters that affect them and to encourage them to get involved so that more voices are heard in Council decisions. Examples of how we did this are:
- 'Let's Talk About What Matters to You' as part of our development of the draft Corporate Plan 2024/30 (see above)
- Children's Services Participation Strategy 2023-2026 outlines our approach to supporting the rights of children, young people, parents, carers, and families in receipt of care and support, to have their voices heard and to actively participate in decisions about their life and help to shape future service developments.
- 'My Day, My Way' programme of engagement continued with people with a learning disability around future day services provision and the production of the co-produced Day Services Strategy and operating model.
- Let's Talk Budget Phase 1 and Phase 2.

- [Development of a new Public Participation Strategy](#) a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Our stakeholder database is continually being refreshed to ensure it remains relevant and fit for purpose so that it can maximise our reach in respect of key engagement projects. We are also reviewing the arrangements for our long-standing Citizens' Panel and groups such as our Disability Forum and Youth Forums. The Council works with 'Age Connects Morgannwg' to support active engagement and involvement with older people in RCT, through the Older People Advisory Group, on the full range of the Council's engagement programme.

The Council's customer care system was updated during 2023. The following 6 months was used by services to cleanse data and identify 'teething problems' so that the system is fully functional for 2024/25. Using the data from this system, a series of Power BI dashboards were built which provide real time complaints, compliments and comments data across the whole Council and individual service areas to Service Managers. A map function within the Dashboard allows the viewer to look at complaints, compliments and comments on a ward basis. This will provide services with intelligence (data) that will strengthen and inform decision making. The system will also provide more timely access to data that will make visible how the Council has responded to the customer feedback stream. More detail can be found in our annual report of our [Customer Feedback Scheme – Comments, Compliments and Complaints 2023/24](#), including a 'You Said, We Did' section that highlights how we have responded to customer feedback. The [Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) report](#) and letter for 2023/24 was considered by [Cabinet in October](#) 2024. The 2023/24 report from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) referenced that 64 complaints were received by the PSOW relating to RCT (54 for 2022-2023). The total number of complaints equates to 0.27 complaints per 1,000 residents, below the Welsh average of 0.36 per 1,000 residents, and fifth lowest in Wales.

The Council's Involvement and Engagement activities have been developed and continue to grow. We engage with a wide range of individuals and groups but we now need to develop our processes further to demonstrate the impact that we are having on our communities. The area for improvement set out within Governance and Scrutiny, namely point A, also relates to Involvement and Engagement.

10. Welsh Language

The Council continues to promote and support the use of the Welsh language across its services. We have a well-resourced and experienced team of Officers that help support the development of the language across our organisation as well as managing our compliance with the Welsh Language Standards. Positive feedback from the Welsh Language Commissioner's office was received during our annual review meeting, however this feedback was verbal with no written reports from the Commissioner to evidence this.

Rhondda Cynon Taf was one of only four local authorities to see an increase in the number of Welsh speakers in the most recent Census. However, language skills across the workforce are not currently in line with the agreed aim of reflecting the proportion of Welsh speakers in the local community in our workforce. Consequently, focus on the development of Welsh language capacity continues through a variety of ways.

Our policies and progress are set out in more detail in the [Welsh language standards Report 2023-24](#) which was approved for publication by the [Welsh Language Cabinet Sub Committee](#) in May 2024.

The Council has strong governance and accountability arrangements through the Welsh Language Cabinet Sub Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, who monitor and scrutinise progress against the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022-27 and its underpinning action plan and the closely linked Welsh in Education Strategic Plan 2022-32, which together aims to increase the number of Welsh speakers in the County Borough. Progress against the Promotion Strategy will be reported to Cabinet sub-committee in October 2024. Good progress against the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan was reported to Overview and Scrutiny in February 2024, and the annual review report received positive feedback from Welsh Government, although this has yet to translate to an increased uptake in Welsh medium education. Culture, Heritage and Welsh Language is one of the four Well-being objectives for the Council's new Corporate Plan 2024-30 'Working with our Communities' and the promotion and use of Welsh is integrated within the plan which is a key document setting the strategic direction of the Council.

Currently only 7% of the Council workforce has Level 5 Welsh speaking ability, 2.2% at Level 4 and 2.1% at Level 3, well below the 12.4% in the RCT population. In October 2023, Welsh Language Cabinet Sub-Committee gave approval for the development of a guaranteed interview scheme for Welsh-speakers who meet the essential criteria of a vacancy. Implementation is aimed for 2025 and it is hoped this scheme will work to remove barriers to improved recruitment of Welsh speakers. Increasing the number of teaching staff able to teach through the medium of Welsh also forms part of our WESP. 94 current staff attended various levels of Welsh language training. In addition, impact on the Welsh language has also been included in the Council's updated management of change process, to ensure account is taken of staff language skills during staffing and structure changes.

Staff awareness of the Welsh language standards requirements and Council processes has also been strengthened, through briefings attended by 455 managers, the delivery of Bitesize sessions to over 900 staff and meetings with service area management teams. This work has strengthened the awareness of staff, leading to a number of follow up requests for support and training and resulting in an increase in simultaneous translation requests.

The Welsh language impact assessment process continues to have positive impact on decision making, as evidenced through the management of change process and inclusion of Welsh language in the Corporate plan priorities outlined above, as well as reconsideration of home to school transport changes, which were revised to reduce the impact on the language. The impact assessment process will be reviewed and fully revised in 2024/25 to draw on learning from the first 3 years of implementation and following advice from Kings Counsel stemming from high profile tribunals.

Complaints relating to Welsh language standards continue to show that residents are aware of their linguistic rights, and the need to further embed the Standards in our work. 21 complaints relating to Welsh language standards were received in 23/24, of which 11 were found to be valid and action undertaken, 9 were not valid or outside the control of the Council and one is still under investigation.

To provide assurance on the progress of our work promoting the Welsh language, information reports have been introduced to the Welsh Language Cabinet Sub Committee which will provide an overview of work being undertaken by services. The first of these, an update on progress within Arts, Libraries, One4All and Community Development, was presented in May 2024. The 2024 Eisteddfod in Rhondda Cynon Taf presents a significant opportunity, and a wide range of work is underway, as reported to the Eisteddfod Cabinet-Sub Committee, to capitalise on community engagement, fundraising and

events and the festivals legacy, including breaking down barriers to attendance by non-Welsh speakers and lower income families, and working with local businesses. We also aim to build on our promotional work through involvement in a project to promote use of specific local services through the Welsh language.

Areas for continued development include improving our knowledge of staff language skills; ensuring opportunities for ongoing consolidation and development of staff language skills through service delivery; further Council wide commitment to Welsh Language development and supporting the delivery of the 5-year Welsh Language promotion strategy action plan, Welsh in Education Strategic Plan and Eisteddfod preparations and legacy planning.

Further Welsh Services information is available through the Council's Website and also the Community and Welsh Language Services, Service Self Evaluation.

The Welsh Language Service continues its good work to promote and support the Welsh language across the Council and they also help to ensure and monitor our compliance with the Welsh Language Standards. Clear arrangements and plans are in place to support this work. No areas for improvement identified at this stage.

11. Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion

The Council continues to strengthen its arrangements to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to fairness and equality. Much or our work in the last year has focused on developing our new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28, which was delayed by a year in an attempt to better align with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's requirements. The strengthening of our values and commitment to our staff in respect of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion have been reinforced in the new Plan which was agreed by Cabinet in March 2024. The Plan sets out the 7 aspects of our commitment through which we will provide equality of opportunity for all and where all staff feel valued and can reach their full potential.

The new Equality Plan sets out three new Equality Objectives, what we will do to achieve the objectives, how we will monitor progress and what success will look like for both our residents and our staff:
1. We will embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into every aspect of our service delivery.
2. We will attract applicants that represent the diversity of our communities, enriching our organisational capability to meet our ambitions.
3. We will respect, value and listen to all our employees by embedding a culture of inclusion.

Our work to deliver the new Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) will be monitored through the newly constituted Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group chaired by the Deputy Leader as we continue to sharpen the governance of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and focus on the use of timely data to demonstrate progress and the impact of our work through the annual Equality Monitoring report as required by the Public Sector Equality duty emerging from the Equality Act 2010. Feedback emerging from pre-scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, also considered by Cabinet also set out the Committee's wish to revisit/review progress in the implementation of the plan.

The SEP integrates within the framework set out within the Council's new Corporate Plan 2024-30 'Working with our Communities approved by Council in April 2024 which also contains our commitment to fair and equal treatment for our staff and residents.

In the meantime. the Annual Equality Report continued to be reported a year in arears. The most recent, i.e. 2022/23, the final report of the previous Strategic Equality Plan 2019-22, considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 20 March 2024. The five Objectives are set out below, with a brief overview of the activity described in the Annual Report.

1. **Better understanding the needs of our communities and the barriers they face to thrive**
   The annual report set out the work undertaken to engage with under-represented minority groups and individuals that have not had regular communication routes with the Council. The report provides examples of our work as a Council and in and with a range of partners to widen our reach and impact across the range of services.

2. **Reducing inequalities that exist in our communities**
   Delivery of activity to reduce inequalities has been impacted by a number of financial and local economic and employment factors. However, a number of activities across a range of projects and services that have provided support, including 'in work', employment, housing and technological support to help reduce inequalities for our residents and staff. We are continuing to strengthen the evidence base from which Council decisions are made, including feedback from engagement with our residents and a widening range of information and data which is made available for review and challenge as consider all impacts to residents in our decision making. An online Data Resource that will provide a single source of data and information to inform Impact Assessments as well as Council Policies and Strategies continues to be developed, with early work focusing on the availability of accessible census data.

3. **Promoting safe communities**
   The report describes the work to reinstate and reinvigorate some previously well-established activities affected by the impact of Covid. Work includes launching the 'Be my Voice' campaign, raising awareness of Learning Disability Hate Crime and encouraging the community to report any incidents they witness, continuing to focus on young people's wellbeing, using the PERMA tool to support understanding and promoting well-being, strengthening both data and analysis of bullying incidents in schools and putting in place tools and projects that encourage young people to talk about and explore what makes healthy and unhealthy relationships.

4. **Reducing the gender pay gap**
   The gender pay-gap for all employees reduced from 10.24% to 9.49% in 2022. The main reason for this was the 2022-2023 pay award for NJC employees of an increase of £1,925 (pro rata) on all grades. This had a more positive impact for employees on the lower grades and as the lower grades are occupied predominantly by female staff the gender pay gap decreased. However, we are continuing to identify, understand and address those barriers women face in the workplace in progressing their careers.

5. **Creating an inclusive workforce**
   We continue with a range of Staff Networks, Senior Diversity Champions and holding numerous diversity and inclusion events to promote inclusion in the workplace we continue to encourage conversations to tackle stigma and discrimination in the workplace. This has been progressed further through the commitments to staff within the new Strategic Equality Plan.

At a Service level, Equalities and Diversity continued to feature in the Council's Service Self Evaluation (SSE) processes which provide a timely and transparent vehicle for strategic challenge and support of our services.

The Equalities and Diversity Service continues its good work to promote and support equality and diversity across our organisation and they also help to ensure and monitor our compliance. Clear arrangements and plans are in place to support this work. No areas for improvement identified at this stage.

12. Regulators Feedback

Our approach to responding to Regulators' reports is open and transparent, with reports considered by the relevant committees. Details can be found here.

The Council continues to maintain constructive and productive relationships with its Regulators.

Following the Assurance and Risk Assessment, Audit Wales issued the 2022/23 Audit findings in its Annual Audit Summary (AAS). The AAS was reported by Audit Wales to the Governance and Audit Committee on 29 April 2024 and featured three aspects

- **Audit of Accounts**: Featuring an unqualified audit opinion on the 2022/23 statement of accounts.
- **Use of Performance information**: Service user perspective and outcomes, emerging from an earlier Assurance and Risk Assessment, see below.
- **Digital Strategy Review**, part of 2022/23 Audit Plan. Findings imminent.

Evidence shows that the Council continues to respond well to feedback within Regulatory reports specific to the Council. A recent example is the Audit Wales local report in respect of '*Use of Performance information - service user perspective and outcomes*' considered by Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting on 24th January 2024. The recommendations have been agreed by the designated Council Officers and actions are progressing to implement the recommendations.

We can also demonstrate that we use National Reports and Studies to challenge how we deliver and commission our services and use local reports from neighbouring Councils as a benchmarking tool. We seek to maximise the value of the Audit Programme and the Audit fees we pay for the benefit of the Council, its residents and communities. Regulators' findings are also used as evidence and/or measures of service or corporate performance, for example within Service Self Evaluations and within Delivery Planning.

Positively, the Regulators feedback reinforced the Council's own assessment of its strengths and areas for further work, particularly in the context of the significant financial and other challenges ahead.

13. Climate Change and Carbon Reduction in RCT

The Council's Decarbonisation Strategy and Action Plan, agreed by the former Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group in March 2023 continues to direct carbon reduction in the Council's operations to meet the target of a Carbon Neutral Council by 2030. In November 2023, an update of progress of the Decarbonisation Strategy and Plan was considered by the Climate Change, Frontline Services and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee.

The 2022/23 Welsh Government's Net Zero Reporting Guide was used to calculate the Council's Carbon 2022/23 Carbon Footprint. The Council's 2022/23 Carbon Footprint was calculated to be 96,640 tCO2e, a reduction from 120.907.4 tCO2e in 2021/22. The detailed findings for the 2022/23 Footprint as ratified by Welsh Government were considered by the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee at its meeting in December 2023.

In order to establish the cost of carbon reduction, and as referred to in the Council's response to the Audit Wales national report Public Sector Readiness for Net Zero Carbon considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2023, the Council commissioned the Carbon Trust to develop a report that will outline the impact of completed decarbonisation projects and establish the indicative costs of our contribution to the 'Net Zero' 2030 targets set by Welsh Government, and progress the grant funded carbon reduction projects including Ultra Low Emission Vehicle Transformation and Peatland Development.

All new Welsh Government funded schools delivered as part of the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme are Net Zero carbon in operation and meet Welsh Government's requirements that '*all new school and college buildings, major refurbishment and extension projects will be required to meet Net Zero Carbon targets from January 1 2022'*. This year, we have progressed the Welsh Medium Primary Net Zero school at Rhydyfelin and embarked on the first 'Passivhaus' primary school project in Glyncoch.

The Council continues to make positive steps to reduce carbon emissions within the Council and the County Borough, to meet the Council's climate ambitions that mirror the Council's priorities and to contribute to the Welsh Government's ambition for a Net Zero Public Sector. Despite our positive progress this year, we know there is much more to do to accelerate the scale and pace of work, strengthen integration with the range of emerging Welsh Government and regional carbon reduction initiatives.

To meet these challenges, our work in 2023/24 included:
- Continuing to implement the Council's Tackling Climate Change Strategy – 'Think Climate RCT', agreed in June 2022. The high level progress to meet the commitments within the strategy was reported to Cabinet within the Council's Quarterly Performance Reports. However, more visible quarterly updates of across the breadth of the Strategy have been considered by the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee and scrutinised by the Climate Change, Prosperity and Frontline Scrutiny Committee. Relevant reports have also been considered by Cabinet and subject specific Scrutiny Committees.
- Continuing to embed carbon reduction and our work to respond to the Welsh Government declared Climate and Nature emergencies into the business of the Council as we developed the Council's new Corporate Plan from 2024.
- Continued to implement the Council's Decarbonisation Strategy that provides the framework for reducing our own carbon footprint, agreed by the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee on 23

March 2023. Our third annual Carbon Footprint calculation that will enable us to better monitor our progress and the effect of the Decarbonisation Strategy, was considered by the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee at its meeting on 21 December 2023. The reported Carbon Emission calculation for 2022/23, was 96,639.83 tonnes CO2e.

- Establishing the cost of our Decarbonisation Plans as reported to the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee on 7 March 2024.
- Working as part of the Cardiff Capital Region to develop a Local Area Energy Plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- Progressing a range of carbon reduction and energy generation projects, energy efficiency schemes, tree planting, natural regeneration and peatland restoration.
- Continuing to develop and implement a range of energy generation Projects as reported to the Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee on 7 March 2024.
- Completing the Climate Change Engagement Plan agreed by Climate Change Cabinet Sub Committee in March 2023. The results of the Climate Change Engagement have been considered in the relevant Climate developments and the development of the Council's new Corporate Plan.
- Contributing to development of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM) Climate Risk Assessment as part of the CTM Well-being Objective for 'Sustainable and resilient local neighbourhoods' as contained within the CTM Well-being Plan 2023-28.
- Developing Key Lines of Climate Enquiry to support and strengthen officer reports, support and Member Scrutiny.
- More widely, RCT residents had the opportunity to benefit from subsidised bus travel, £1 maximum fare, across the County Borough between 24 July and 3 September, 1 and 31 December 2023 and 12 to 18 February 2024.

There are two specific Climate related risks in the Council's Strategic Risk Register, with controls and actions in place, see update in Quarter 4 report to Cabinet on 17 July 2024 for completeness.

The Council has a good track record of dedicating resources to tackle climate change and identifying and delivering 'green' alternatives to reduce or offsetting our carbon footprint. Detailed Strategies and plans are in place to help deliver the required change needed to meet the ambition to be Carbon Neutral Council by 2030. No areas for improvement identified at this stage.

14. Corporate Safeguarding

The Council's Corporate Safeguarding Policy has been in place for a number of years and underpins the arrangements in place across the Council. The Policy provides a framework setting out how we can be assured that we are fulfilling our duties to safeguard the people that live across our communities. The Policy is subject to continuous review.

A Corporate Safeguarding Group, chaired by the Chief Executive, is responsible for ensuring that the Council carries out its responsibilities for the safeguarding of children and adults at risk, as set out in the Corporate Safeguarding Policy.

The Group ensures that robust arrangements for safeguarding are in place across the Council. This includes seeking assurances that the Council has effective performance management processes in place to fulfil its duties corporately and in partnership with other statutory agencies. The Council's corporate safeguarding arrangements are over and above the statutory requirements within the Education and Social Care Sector.

As set out within the Corporate Safeguarding Policy *'Safeguarding is everyone's business whether they work for, or on behalf of, the Council'*.

At its meeting held on 29 January 2024 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report that summarised the work delivered in respect of the Council's corporate safeguarding arrangements for 2022/23. The report considered by the Committee concluded that *the Council continues to make progress in delivering its Corporate Safeguarding responsibilities.* The report was presented later than planned, and a commitment was given at that stage to present the 2023/24 summary report sooner in the 2024/25 Municipal Year. The annual summary report for 2023/24 is due to be reported during the autumn of 2024.

At its meeting on 29 January 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and pre scrutinised the updated Corporate Safeguarding Policy, following a review of our arrangements in the light of the Corporate Safeguarding Good Practice Guidance commissioned by the Welsh Government in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association. The new Corporate Safeguarding Policy was subsequently considered and approved by Cabinet on 21 February 2024.

Our positive progress in respect of delivering the Corporate Safeguarding Policy covered developing a Delivery Plan for 2023/24 and included actions relevant to corporate safeguarding risks across the Council. The group membership was expanded to include a wider range of functions to manage emerging risks, for example, around digital and data security.

The Corporate Safeguarding Group met 4 times during the year, a key focus of the Group was to review progress against the agreed delivery plan. Specific deliverables are listed as follows:

- Putting in place new performance management arrangements that align with the Council's performance reporting periods. This helped to ensure robust monitoring of actions, and increased accountability.
- The Council's Service Self Evaluation template was updated to include a section on Corporate Safeguarding. The outcomes from this work have been used to inform this Annual Self-Assessment.
- Agreeing and implementing Council specific Safeguarding Training Standards based on the National Training Standards.
- Receiving a report from the Head of Attendance & Wellbeing Service outlining the systems in place at all schools to record concerns raised within the school environment. The report demonstrated the reporting capabilities of the system and outlined how the information is used – in consultation with Headteachers and Safeguarding Cluster Groups for example.
- Receiving a thematic report summarising safeguarding issues arising from internal audit inspections of schools. The annual Internal Audit report indicated there is generally a sound system of governance, risk management and control in place in respect of safeguarding with areas of good practice identified.
- Preparing and sharing with Suppliers, a guide to 'Tackling Modern Slavery in our Supply Chains' to raise their awareness of the Council's approach in this area.
- Putting in place robust arrangements across the Council's supply chain aimed at ensuring compliance with stringent Cyber Security protocols.
- Continuing to roll out mandatory Safeguarding training and ensuring safe recruitment processes remain in place across the Council.

- Noting that staff awareness of Corporate Safeguarding requirements has been assessed in the recent staff survey and remained reassuringly high with 96% of respondents aware of the Council's Corporate Safeguarding policy and, 92% confirming they knew how to report suspected or know abuse/neglect.

Whilst good progress has been made during 2023/24, we know we have more work to do. Examples of areas where improvement is needed, or where we need to continue to deliver robust arrangements are listed as follows:

- Leadership & Culture
  - Put in place a range of communication activities to ensure all staff and elected Members are advised and reminded of their responsibilities in respect of Corporate Safeguarding and in particular the new Corporate Safeguarding Policy approved in February 2024. For example, staff newsletter, posters, improved web site presence, social media.
  - Review and refresh the Council's existing Social Media Policy to ensure it identifies and addresses safeguarding risks.

- Professional practice & Standards
  - Continuing to ensure that safeguarding is included within tender packs and on procurement policy web pages, e.g. keeping people safe, whistleblowing and tackling modern slavery.
  - Ensuring that relevant contracts are subject to ongoing cyber security risk assessments.

- Workforce, Recruitment & Selection
  - Establish the required frequency of Level 1 refresher training for all staff (excluding those that work with children and adults), and then put actions in place to roll this out. Ensure this training is mandatory.
  - Investigate the potential to use the I-Trent system as the central repository that records all safeguarding training delivered to staff.
- Governance, Scrutiny & Performance Management
  - Review the Corporate Safeguarding element of the Service Self-Evaluation to strengthen service assurance with compliance with corporate safeguarding arrangements for the 2024 SSE.
  - Consider how Corporate Safeguarding can be embedded into 2025/26 Service Delivery Plans.
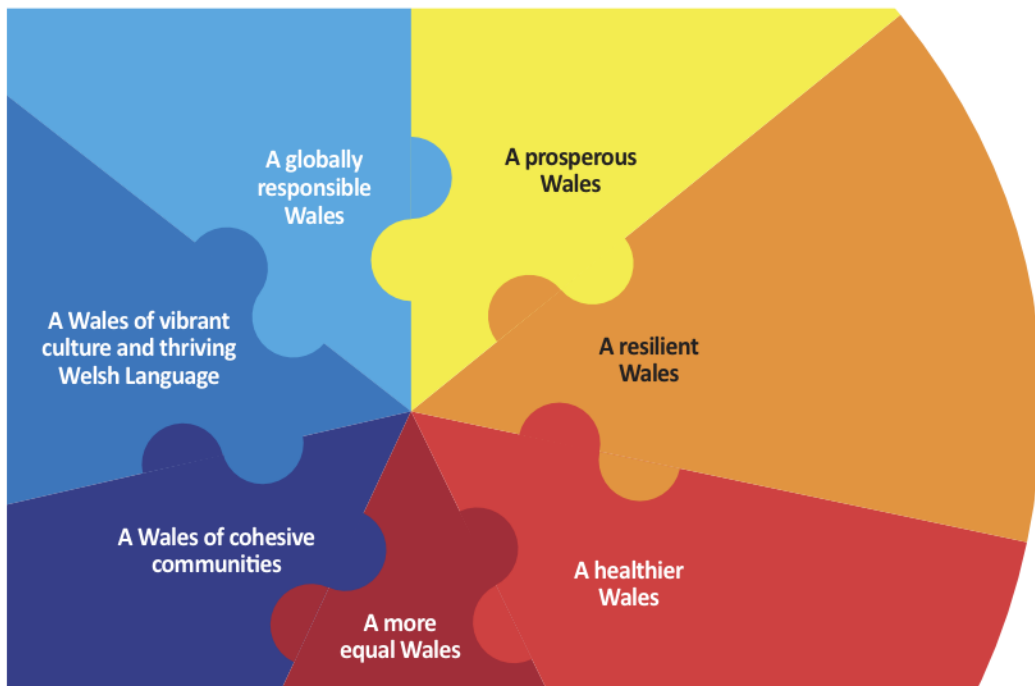
The new Corporate Safeguarding Policy establishes a framework within which the Council can continue to discharge its safeguarding responsibilities to keep the most vulnerable people in our communities safe. The new Corporate Safeguarding Framework comprises four areas of activity:

- Leadership & Culture
- Governance, Scrutiny & Performance Management
- Professional practice & Standards
- Workforce, Recruitment & Selection

In the light of the new Corporate Safeguarding Policy and its Framework areas, a new Corporate Safeguarding Delivery Plan 2024/27 has been developed. It is structured around the four areas of activity listed above and incorporates areas of work that were not fully implemented during 2023/24 as well as new actions. The delivery plan will be monitored and reported using the Council's Performance Management Framework with progress being monitored by the Corporate Safeguarding Group.

The Council's strategic importance of corporate safeguarding has also been incorporated into the Council's new Corporate Plan 2024-30, approved by Council on 24 April 2024. The Council's new Corporate Plan, 'Working with our Communities' contains four Well-being Objectives that are supported by underpinning Priorities, and a section that identifies the robust governance arrangements that need to be in place for our Council to be considered a 'well-run Council'. Corporate Safeguarding is a key element of the Council's robust governance arrangements.

A globally responsible Wales

A prosperous Wales

A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh Language

A resilient Wales

A Wales of cohesive communities

A more equal Wales

A healthier Wales

How we are applying the Sustainable Development principle and contributing to the seven national Well-being goals

SECTION 2d

How we are applying the Sustainable Development principle and contributing to the seven national Well-being goals

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires the Council and all public bodies, to set well-being objectives that maximise their contribution to achieving the seven national well-being goals. In doing so, the Council is expected to take all reasonable steps to meet those well-being objectives. For 2023/24, the Council's three Priorities People: Places and Prosperity contained within our Corporate Plan 2020-2024 were considered to be the Well-being Objectives.

During 2023/24 we have been developing our new Corporate Plan 'Working with our Communities'. Our new Plan, agreed by Cabinet on 20 March 2024 and approved by Council on 24 April 2024, sets out four new Well-being Objectives which more clearly and closely align to the four pillars of Sustainable Development i.e.

1. **PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES** – Social Well-being.
2. **WORK AND BUSINESS** – Economic Well-being.
3. **NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT** – Environmental Well-being.
4. **CULTURE, HERITAGE and WELSH LANGUAGE –** Cultural Well- being.

To demonstrate that we are applying the Sustainable Development (SD) principle, Public Bodies must apply five Ways of Working and contribute to seven national Well-being goals. The Plan sets out how we have applied the five ways of work to and how the plan contributes to the seven national Well-being Goals. We know there is more work to do to embed these principles in all our work to deliver the Plan and how we evidence this through the five Ways of Working. Ongoing progress is included in our longstanding Quarterly Performance Reports, our annual Self-Assessment and our end of year reports. These arrangements will continue as we put in place arrangements to manage and monitor the delivery of our new Corporate Plan.

The Act also sets out seven core activities that are most likely to secure organisational change, which are considered in Section 5 of this Assessment. The Council's approach to the Well-being of Future Generations agreed by Cabinet in 2016 is to embed its requirements into the Council's business. The seven national goals, together with the five Ways of Working, have been incorporated into performance management arrangements including the detailed action plans that have delivered the Council's priorities.

In the last year as well as strengthening the alignment to the four pillars of SD through our new Corporate Plan, we continued to make up for the interruption to our progress as a result of our focus on response and recovery to the pandemic, e.g.

- continuing to strengthen our Performance Management arrangements to embed the SD principles/5 'Ways of Working' into Service Self Evaluations and Delivery Plans,
- delivering high-level training to Members and Senior Officers,
- the continuing development of Key Lines of Enquiry for elected Members to support constructive challenge
- exploring the simplified 'Maturity Matrix' and testing the Ways of Working Progress Checker tool, launched by the Future Generations Commissioner in March 2024, and how we can best apply this with services and at strategic level e.g. in developing the revised Involvement Strategy.

Our 2020-24 Corporate Plan also contains examples of how its work is contributing to the seven national Well-being goals. A selection of our contributions to the goals have been summarised for illustrative purposes in Section 4 of this report. Our new Corporate Plan also contains a similar Appendix.

This stand-alone section in respect of the Sustainable Development, is clear that we have more to do to support and embed our approach across the Council's business, particularly in the context of reducing resources.

The Auditor General for Wales has the power to examine public bodies, to assess the extent to which a body has acted in accordance with the Sustainable Development Principle when setting well-being objectives and taking steps to meet those well-being objectives.

The application of the Sustainable Development (SD) principle is now routinely fed back as part of local audit findings in all Audit Wales reports to Local Authorities. This audit requirement in respect of the SD principle, among things means considering how we apply the five ways of working i.e. Involving; Collaborating; Integrating; Thinking Long Term and Preventing things from happening or getting worse. This audit requirement in respect of the Act does not apply to Care Inspectorate Wales or ESTYN inspections.

In 2023/24 the Audit Wales Audit Programme contained two WFG specific reviews:
a) Application of the Sustainable Development Principle Local Project emerging from the Assurance and Risk Assessment.
   The findings from the above review have been published and will be reported to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee in 2024/25.

b) Setting of Well-being Objectives to meet the Auditor General's statutory duty to examine each public body at least once in a five-year period, presenting their reports on the examinations to the National Assembly for Wales a year and a day before each ordinary Assembly election.
   This review will be undertaken in 2024/25.

The findings emerging from these reviews will be available for consideration in the 2024/25 Self-Assessment and in the meantime, will be used to inform how we continue to strengthen our approach to the application of the sustainable development principle.

We continue to liaise with the office of the Future Generations Commissioner and welcome their assistance in delivering training referred to above and the future training awareness raising in 2024/25, with the first event delivered on June 2024. We also welcome the new Progress Checker

tool, which we are currently using to challenge and strengthen our corporate approaches and to test with select services as a starting point. We are pleased to see the introduction of practical, consistent and transparent tools to support and challenge long term thinking in the context of health in the recently published Long Term Thinking to reduce health inequalities for current and future generations and we will be seeking ways we can use the tool to strengthen our organisational approach and also integrate it with our National Institute for Health and Care Research funded Health Determinants Research Collaboration aiming to reduce Health Inequality in RCT. The Future Generations Commissioner has recently written to Chief Executives in respect of the use of the Act particularly in the context of finance, risk and asset planning following his concern that the Welsh Government's draft budget failed '*take sufficient account of the long-term and will store up further inequalities and create costly future pressures for our already depleted public bodies including our National Health Service'.* We look forward to working with the Commissioner's office to develop this approach further.

We will continue to lobby for further national support, including from Welsh Government, to strengthen its approach to Sustainable Development, particularly in respect of Policy integration and roll out, so that this integration is strengthened and managed once and can be more consistently and practically cascaded at the point of local implementation.

Overall Conclusion

SECTION 2e
Overall Conclusion

Based on the review undertaken and the evidence in place, the Council's arrangements have provided the basis to maintain the organisations' financial stability and resilience, during a period of significant financial pressures and constrained funding, through robust planning, prioritisation and management of scarce resources.

This position was underpinned by sound scrutiny and decision-making processes and well-established self-assessment arrangements, and supported Corporate Plan priority areas, wider service delivery and improved outcomes for service users. A small number of areas for improvement have been identified to further strengthen existing processes.

Accordingly, based on the self-assessment process the Council has demonstrated that it has exercised its functions effectively; used its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and that governance arrangements were effective for securing the above.

Our annual self-assessment has also identified areas for improvement, and these are included under the relevant sections of this report. These areas will be monitored throughout 2024/25 as part of our performance management arrangements.