

# Executive Summary: Self-Assessment of Performance, 2023 to 2024

Together with our quarterly update reports for 2023 to 2024 that have functioned as our ongoing assessment throughout the year, this document makes up our Self-Assessment of Performance required under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. It presents an accessible end-of-year summary of our performance against key functions, specifically our Well-Being Objectives (otherwise referred to as our Corporate Plan themes), the seven governance areas, and the Public Sector Equality Duty (which includes the new Socio-Economic Duty). To review the evidence behind the conclusions in this document, please refer to the Performance Update Reports, published on our [website](#).

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## Our Approach to Self-Assessment

Our approach to Self-Assessment follows the same one undertaken for the first year that one was legally required, in 2020 to 2021. We have continued to use a new style of Performance Self-Assessment Update report, one that responds to the performance requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and reflects on the Corporate Health of the organisation. Our Performance Update Reports, published [online](#), involve an analysis of the seven governance areas recommended by the Act's statutory guidance, as well as continuing to catalogue the activity of our principle meetings (Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny, and Governance and Audit), key news items, and reports by our internal audit and external regulators. This Executive Summary brings the volume of the reports together alongside a critical overview of our performance, the extent to which our performance is driving positive outcomes and how well our governance is supporting continuous improvement. This summary also looks ahead to key opportunities and challenges.

It is a requirement that the council, through its self-assessment process, identify improvement actions, and in subsequent self-assessment reports provide an update on our progress against them. We have achieved this through our Performance Update reports (supporting the principle of ongoing assessment), which have identified improvement actions during their production. The council's Service Performance Challenge programme, recommenced this year and fed into Update reports. We have a great body of quality evidence around how we are performing as a council, which has been comprehensively catalogued in our quarterly Self-Assessment Performance Update reports. These make up our ongoing self-assessment. During this year, due to resources and capacity, we produced three quarterly reports for the periods April to June 2023, July to September 2023, and October 2023 to March 2024.

During September 2023 and February 2024, the council issued its 'Stakeholder Survey' for the third time, achieving a response of 494. Based on a population estimate of 96,550, the response exceeds what is considered an 'ideal sample' of between 267 and 383. An analysis of the most recent results is provided in our accompanying Self-Assessment Performance Update report for the period October 2023 to March 2024.

## Equality and Diversity

The Corporate Plan contains our equality and well-being objectives, and these are reported through our quarterly reports. In addition, our activities broadly align to the proposed regional public sector objectives and to the national challenges published in the [Equality and Human Rights Commission 'Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer?' report](#) produced in November 2023.

Up until February 2024, the Fairer, Safe and More Equal Board (FSE Board) received these reports and monitored equality and diversity matters. Following the changes to the Corporate Plan, we enhanced the remit of the Strategic Equality and Diversity Group (SEDG) to include oversight of all equality and diversity matters and subsequently closed the FSE Board in March 2024.

SEDG, chaired by the Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities, has, during the year, agreed the content of the statutory Public Sector Equality Duty and Gender Pay Gap reports; received an update on the Council's Menopause Policy and; approved the collation of a comprehensive list of organisations that support people with protected characteristics or those living with socio-economic disadvantage in the county, including seldom heard groups, which will be reviewed every six months. Use of this list will assist us in strengthening our engagement and communication work and ensuring more equal outcomes for people, including reducing inequalities associated with poverty. The Group has also considered the completion and quality of Well-being Impact Assessments (for example, the impact assessment of the Relationship and Sexual Education Policy); discussed how Welsh Government Action Plans on equality (this past year it has been the LGBTQ+ Action Plan) can be incorporated into council business; and agreed the council's response to the Welsh Government's consultation on its draft Strategic Equality Plan 2024 to 2028.

Whilst SEDG is not a decision-making body, it can refer issues and make recommendations to relevant committees and groups as deemed necessary. One such recommendation was to County Council to look at including equality as a mandatory e-learning module for members (it is already mandatory for officers). SEDG is therefore working with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) to provide equality and diversity training for members in April 2024.

In the autumn of 2024, our Strategic Equality and Diversity Group will consider a report looking at the impact of the budget proposals to date, their impact from an equality and diversity perspective (both in terms of community impact and impact on staff).

The Council website pages on [equality and diversity](#) were updated in March 2024, to incorporate the demographics of the county, with data compiled by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), related to the Census 2021.

## **Overall, how well are we doing?**

This past year has been the most challenging year, financially, for the council – with members and officers having to make very difficult decisions to ensure we deliver a balanced budget whilst considering the impact of our decisions on current and future generations. This section summarises our performance and governance across the year into some general observations about our strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges.

- During the year we have responded to the financial pressures all local authorities are facing responsibly; we have used our resources economically, efficiently, and effectively; our governance is functioning and effective; and our focus is on securing the best possible outcomes for our environment and communities in Denbighshire.
- Our efforts to actively engage members and staff from across the organisation around the budget have been good and positively received. We are already working on our approach to the 2025 to 2026 budget to ensure we can build an even deeper engagement and understanding, whilst also tracking the savings we have already committed to. Our approach is to be adaptive and do more of what works best.
- Our governance is well-functioning and responsive - demonstrated by the additional Scrutiny that has been put in place, at the request of members, around aspects of our budget proposals.
- The challenge to ensure backbenchers continue to feel a part of the decision-making process around budget and in terms of the delivery of the Corporate Plan over the next few years remains. As predicted in last year's Self-Assessment, members have been asked to make ever more challenging decisions over finances and service delivery. Members have responded to the challenge and considered what are often undesirable but pragmatic steps in ensuring we can deliver a balanced budget whilst trying to minimise, as far as possible, negative impacts for community and environmental well-being.

- Through the Corporate Plan and the work of the Well-Run Board, we are taking every opportunity to bring our values and principles to life. We are a self-reflecting, learning authority, and whilst difficult decisions around budget have had to be considered and implemented, we want to capitalise on the growing understanding of our culture, what it means to be a part of the “Denbighshire family” and promote our One Council approach. Our [principles and values](#) will stand us in good stead. In the year ahead, we want to establish an on-going programme of cross-service conversations and capitalise on the growing confidence of members and officers using Welsh informally and formally during council business.
- The new senior leadership structure is now in place and is working well. Whilst reduced capacity as the workforce shrinks is an issue there are growing opportunities to consider new transformational ways of working. What were previously cited as gaps for which no clear agreed way forward had been agreed, such as around Denbighshire’s cultural and heritage potential, have started to be addressed. We must strive to be agile in recognising and resolving barriers to progress; and ensure we remain resilient as our capacity reduces.
- Whilst the council still faces some recruitment and retention issues the financial pressures all councils are experiencing has resulted in the council having to implement controls during the period to limit spend, including implementation of vacancy control procedures. Recruitment was still able to take place in critical areas such as Adult Social Care and Children’s Services, but vacancies in those services persist. Whilst we continue to pursue opportunities to reduce pressures in workforce, we face limitations in doing so because of our reducing capacity and resources. More detail can be found in the [Director of Social Services annual report for 2022 to 2023](#) (the 2023 to 2024 report is due imminently).
- The recommencement of Service Performance Challenges has been an important development this year, leading to improved performance in respect of the completion of 121s. Going forward (and responding to the present crisis), the 2024 to 2025 Challenges will likely focus on finance and transformation. We also look forward to our first ever Panel Peer Assessment, due to take place in the autumn of 2024. The key to the success of the Assessment will be to tailor it to meet our council’s needs and work is already underway with close working between officers, members and the Welsh Local Government Association.

# **Performance Objectives – Corporate Plan 2022 to 2027**

## **A Denbighshire of quality housing that meets people's needs**

Measures: Acceptable

Projects: Experiencing Obstacles

The Corporate Plan Housing and Homelessness Board continues to oversee this theme and has recently reviewed the Housing and Homelessness Strategy, which had some minor issues in terms of time slippage, mainly because we are currently awaiting new Welsh Government Flood Risk guidance. We are working on the development of the Development Viability Model, which will form the basis of the work to review the current approach and thresholds for affordable housing requirements in Local Development Plan (LDP) policies. Our Capital Works Programmes continue to be delivered but cost increases are impacting on the volume of work in terms of affordability. Budgets are being closely monitored and programmes of works amended and prioritised accordingly. Welsh Government launched Wales Housing Quality Standards in October 2023 with newer measures to be introduced from 1 April 2024; we are still considering the implications of these, ahead of their introduction. The number of people on the SARTH register increased to 1,706 this period, and remains a concern. However, we successfully secured 25 additional council homes for people in Denbighshire by the end of March 2024.

## **A prosperous Denbighshire**

Measures: Priority for Improvement

Projects: On Target

The measures status for this theme has been summarised overall as a 'Priority for Improvement'. However, it should be noted that these include broad and long-term indicators such as those from the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation and stakeholder survey responses. Recognising the local and global economic challenges it faces, the council is currently developing (April 2024 onwards) an Economic Strategy to include green, rural, and urban economic growth plans as well as enhancing tourism. The new Economic Strategy should take into account the county's cultural offer and how it contributes to wider economic and well-being outcomes.



## **A healthier and happier, caring Denbighshire**

Measures: Acceptable

Projects: On Target

Overall, the status of measures for this theme is 'Acceptable.' A 'Priority for Improvement' is the number of schools achieving trauma informed status – although more schools are working towards this status - and the percentage of stakeholders who agree that they can live safely, happily, and independently, in Denbighshire. The fall in the annual percentage of new assessments completed for children during the year that were completed within statutory timescales means this measure remains a 'Priority for Improvement'. Excellence is being achieved in adult safeguarding and social care through micro providers, and there is a status upgrade to 'Good' for the percentage of stakeholders who agree that Denbighshire has the social infrastructure needed to support personal and community well-being. Access to advice and assistance continues to be provided through the Single Point of Access (SpoA) and Talking Points and an encouraging 92% of citizens receiving assistance from Talking Points did not need to be referred into Adult Social Care during January to March 2024. We now monitor hate crimes reported in Denbighshire to North Wales Police. During January to March, 34 hate crimes were reported, the majority of which were categorised as racial.

## **A learning and growing Denbighshire**

Measures: Acceptable

Projects: Experiencing Obstacles

The measures in this theme have been graded overall as 'Acceptable,' however, we await the end of the academic year for a fuller picture of the data relating to schools. A 'Priority for Improvement' is the percentage of care leavers who experience homelessness during the year, which has increased to 17%. Also of concern is the percentage of Year 11 Leavers from schools known not to be in education, employment or training. For 2023 to 2024, Denbighshire's figure of 2.4% is higher than that of 17 of the other 21 local authorities in Wales. The support provided to promote the development of children in the early years has continued to strengthen, with excellent rates of children taking part in the childcare offer and continued excellent performance in supporting entry to nursery. Projects related to early years child development are progressing well, with the expansion of Flying Start 'On Target' as well as the completion of two other projects. Whilst the

number of schools providing education through suitability and condition categories C and D is considered 'Excellent', the Modernising Education Programme continues to be at risk due to delays in the progression of work. By January 2024, the universal free school meals offer was made available to all primary pupils across Denbighshire.

## **A greener Denbighshire**

Measures: Acceptable

Projects: Experiencing Obstacles

The Climate and Ecological Change Strategy is scheduled to be reviewed and refreshed every three years; the first of which began in 2023 to 2024. There are a number of key performance indicators that are being used to judge the performance of the council in achieving its 2030 goals, including: reducing carbon emissions the council emits from various sources, increasing carbon sequestration of land the council owns/leases and manages and increasing the species richness of the land the council owns/leases and manages. Whilst we are going in the right direction it is not currently at the pace to suggest sufficient progress is being made to meet the 2030 goal of net carbon zero. The financial pressures all local authorities are facing now and in the coming years will continue to impact on that pace. We plan to maintain our Climate and Ecological Improvement ambition and not adjust targets - despite their challenge - as we go into the next three years of our strategy. A key project for this theme is the introduction of a new recycling system in June of this year to help us meet Welsh Government's 70% recycling target (the target set for all local authorities in Wales).

## **A well-run, high performing council**

Measures: Priority for Improvement

Projects: On Target

The Well-run Board is settling into its role in nurturing and ensuring good governance and a positive 'one council' culture. The Board is taking a growing role in a number of key areas; including annual self-assessment, service performance challenges, and the peer-led Panel Performance Assessment. Anecdotally there is a much greater use of Welsh formally at committee meetings, and informally in the day-to-day business of the council. The Board is keen to capitalise on the growing confidence in using Welsh. The general decline in positive responses to our stakeholder survey has brought the overall status of our measures down from 'Acceptable' to 'Priority for Improvement'. This decline is

unsurprising given the difficult financial climate and the savings proposals the council has most recently consulted on and begun implementing.

## **Governance Functions – The Council’s Corporate Health**

Denbighshire’s [annual governance statement](#) highlights specific strengths and areas for improvement. The 2022 to 2023 statement built on the improvement actions identified in 2021 to 2022 that link to our governance functions, such as workforce capacity and resilience, code of conduct, procurement and contract management, funding and whistleblowing. Our Annual Governance Statement for 2023 to 2024 will be presented to Governance and Audit Committee in July 2024.

### **Corporate Planning**

This section looks at how the council sets out and delivers its strategic objectives. In this last year, the council had to take significant steps in light of worsening financial and capacity pressures to revisit and revise its Well-being and Equality Objectives, whilst ensuring that it continued to meet legislative requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and the Equality Act (Wales) Regulations 2011. A revised Corporate Plan, which reduced the number of themes from nine to six, was unanimously approved by [County Council in February 2024](#). It should also be noted that the council in this year received a favourable report from Audit Wales for the way in which it set its original Well-being Objectives in 2022. The council has been working over this last year to put in place its new Corporate Executive and Senior Leadership Teams from April 2023, which has included two new directors, and recruitment to four vacant Head of Service posts. We have also moved our New Ways of Working project forward to the next phase, looking to reduce the size of the office accommodation that we hold. We received an Audit Wales report on our Corporate Support Functions which was positive and we have made good progress against its recommendations. We are making excellent progress with the arrangements for a Panel Performance Assessment to be held in September 2024, responding to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act, 2021. Improvement actions identified over the last year have therefore, on the whole, progressed well. However, we acknowledge that overall stakeholder satisfaction with the council and its long-term plans is not where we would like it to be. Our revised Corporate Plan maintains a clear focus on how the council works, including customer service, engagement, and our performance. It is important that we demonstrate improvement in these areas and respond to the expectations of our

customers. The key challenge for the council in the months ahead, however, will be with the establishment of its transformation programme, which will need to enable the council to respond innovatively and collaboratively to the challenges that it is facing. We must also as a council keep our Corporate Plan commitments and performance expectations under continual review in the context of the present difficult financial environment.

## **Financial Planning**

This section looks at our [financial planning](#), which relates to the management of our income and expenditure. The council's financial planning arrangements have proven robust, and the council holds a reasonably stable reserve and has strong monitoring and planning mechanisms in place to actively manage pressures, such as the Medium Term Financial Plan, Treasury Management, the Budget Setting process, and a Capital Budget setting process. The Corporate Governance and Audit Committee has also provided assurance regarding the council's financial management processes during the year. Significant work has taken place this period to respond effectively to the significant financial pressures the council is facing to try to protect the most vulnerable as far as possible. Our accompanying September to March report outlines in some detail the process and decisions around budget setting for the year ahead. Some proposals have been subject to more intensive examination by our Scrutiny Committee structure, demonstrating that governance is effective, responsive and challenging. The 2024 to 2025 budget is being viewed as an evolving process rather than a one-off event in January. Significant engagement across the council, with members and with communities will therefore continue.

## **Performance Management**

This section looks at our [performance management](#), by which we mean the structures and processes that we have in place to ensure we deliver what we said we would, whilst encouraging active involvement and challenge from across the council, our elected members and residents. The council began in this last year to report on its new Corporate Plan Performance Management Framework, with excellent engagement and input at all levels of the organisation, but acknowledging some initial teething and data gap issues to work through. Following February's decision by County Council to reduce the size of the Corporate Plan, the Framework was again revisited with senior managers and Cabinet members to help simplify and streamline our reporting. We had highlighted in our Self-Assessment last year that the size of the framework did present a challenge to us to

manage, so the recent reduction has been a welcome one. Governance arrangements have also been updated to support the revised Corporate Plan. The council has in this last year continued with its approach to self-assessment, reports being published on our [performance webpage](#). However, to support the capacity needs of the organisation, the council has made the decision to switch from quarterly Corporate Plan Performance Update reports to six-monthly reports. Our [Performance Management Guide](#) has been updated on our website to reflect all these recent changes. The council has also delivered on the third year of its annual stakeholder survey, which seeks to engage with our residents, businesses, partners, staff and councillors about how we are performing against our functions, once again seeing an increase in participant numbers from previous years. A report was produced by Audit Wales on the council's use of data pertaining to service user perspectives and outcomes, and the council is assured that present arrangements are robust and adequate within existing resources. Following approval of the new Senior Leadership Team structure, arrangements for the council's Service Performance Challenge programme commenced between May 2023 and March 2024, and key Improvement Actions have been included in our Performance Update Reports. We have also agreed our approach to 2024's Service Performance Challenge programme to help the organisation meet the present financial challenge. Finally, we are also pleased to report that capacity pressures within the council's Internal Audit Team have been addressed, though there has been a significant workload to tackle during the year.

## **Risk Management**

This section looks at our [risk management](#), which describes our planned approach to identify, assess, control and monitor risks and opportunities facing the council. We have continued to deliver our six-monthly reviews of our Corporate Risk Register, with our most recent [review](#) taking place from February to April of this year. It remains the case that around half of our corporate risks (54%) are inconsistent with the council's Risk Appetite Statement. However, this is to be expected as the register contains the council's most serious risks. It is good practice to review the Statement each year and following our most recent review, it was decided that the Statement should be revised in places to reflect the pressures associated with escalating costs and an uncertain economic environment. During the year, prompted by Governance and Audit Committee, it was agreed that we would commence quarterly, lighter-touch reviews with risk owners, to supplement tabled six-monthly reviews and annual reports to Governance and Audit Committee.

## **Workforce Planning**

This section looks at our workforce planning, which is the process by which we analyse, forecast and plan workforce supply and demand, and assess gaps to ensure that we have the people and skills - now and in the future - to deliver our services and fulfil our strategic objectives. Our senior leadership restructure was fully in place from November 2023. This has taken longer than expected but will result in a transformational redesign of services, whereby the council is on the 'front foot' in relation to influencing and preventing demand; better positioned to maximise opportunities; and has clearer leadership on important matters like climate change and Welsh language. During the year the council had to implement significant savings to enable us to set a balanced budget for 2024 to 2025 (with similar challenges facing us for 2025 to 2026). This has involved a range of measures including vacancy control measures, service reductions and the implementation of a voluntary exit scheme. Workforce planning will commence in the autumn/winter of 2024 and will focus on supporting the pressures associated with the budget and its impacts. An Internal Audit review into workforce planning will be undertaken before the end of June 2024. This review will be critical in ensuring our responses to recruitment and retention are correct and effective. During the year, we launched an [Agile Working policy](#) and a new Denbighshire Management Induction Programme. A new People Strategy is in development and plans are underway for a staff survey, expected to take place during 2024.

## **Assets**

This section looks at the latest developments to do with our management of the council's estate (including office buildings and highway infrastructure owned and / or controlled by the council) and digital assets. As we stated last year, the council faces significant challenges with regards to its assets. We have a perennially deteriorating and very large network of roads and bridges, requiring a continued financial budget commitment in order to address this decline, combined with meeting the challenge of progressing significant projects such as the replacement of the Llanerch Bridge; a large portfolio of buildings to align with our Net Carbon Zero ambition; a growing need to support and facilitate decarbonisation in procurements; and growing pressures on our ICT infrastructure. However, we have made improvements. We have delivered a range of projects to improve the energy efficiency of buildings, particularly school buildings, and support the reduction of running costs over the long term in the Council's non-domestic building estate which is responsible for over 60% of council carbon emissions. We have continued to invest in our

capability to generate the council's own electricity from installed renewable energy generation; achieving over a megawatt of installed renewable energy capacity (1099kWp) this year, through, for example, roof mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) panels. Our investments in green public transport, such as through the [electric vehicle charging hub at Rhyl's West Kinmel car park](#), are yielding many benefits, with the hub in Rhyl providing over 250,000 miles of greener transport for motorists in its first year alone. We continue to have robust health and safety and fire safety procedures in place. Community Focussed Schools and how those are maximised as assets will be a focus for the year ahead, as described under our [learning and growing theme](#). The [Digital Strategy Review](#) undertaken by Audit Wales in November 2023 was largely positive, finding that the council has a clearly articulated strategy, but made some recommendations that will inform the development of a new strategy that will run from 2025. A new Asset Management Strategy has been approved by the Corporate Executive Team and will be taken through the democratic process for approval by Cabinet in summer 2024. Once the strategy is in place, we will develop and deliver portfolio plans to determine the shape, size and future use of assets for each of the council's asset management portfolios. The strategy and portfolio plans are closely aligned to workforce planning to ensure our assets are managed for the longer term, in a way that supports and integrates with our workforce plan. This is demonstrated by the New Ways of Working project that has been examining capacity and use of offices to seek ways to maximise the use of space across the council's portfolio (resulting in the closure of Caledfryn, Denbigh, to council staff).

## **Procurement**

This section looks at [procurement](#). Procurement is the process by which the council meets its needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money and good outcomes for society, culture and the economy, whilst contributing to decarbonisation and nature's recovery. The council spent, during the 2023 to 2024 financial year, via procurement (including grant funding), a total of £226,978,810 buying third party goods or services. Denbighshire has continued to prioritise securing local community benefits through our procurements. £83,426,447 has been spent within Denbighshire (35.2%) and 56% of relevant procurements contained community benefits. The third generation North Wales Construction Framework will be officially launched in May 2024. We have been supporting services across the council, businesses and partners to prepare for the changes in procurement legislation; to ensure we are best placed to

secure greater local benefits. The Procurement Service is a collaborative service shared with Flintshire County Council, which we will review over the coming year.