

Springing Forward – Wrexham County Borough Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 As the world moves forward, learning from the global pandemic, this review has looked at how the Council is strengthening its ability to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services, including those delivered in partnership with key stakeholders and communities.
- 2 We reviewed the Council's arrangements for managing its assets and workforce:
 - a. for assets, our primary focus was on office accommodation and buildings from which the Council delivers services to its residents; and
 - b. for workforce, our focus has been on the challenges highlighted during the pandemic that have exacerbated some long-standing workforce issues.We looked at how the Council strategically plans to use its assets and workforce, how it monitors their use and how it reviews and evaluates the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 3 When we began our audit work under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 we recognised that it would take time for public bodies to embed the sustainable development principle, but we also set out our expectation that over the medium term we would expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate how the Act is shaping what they do. It is now approaching seven years since the Well-being of Future Generations Act was passed and we are now into the second reporting period for the Act. Therefore, we would now expect public bodies to be able to demonstrate that the Act is integral to their thinking and genuinely shaping what they do.
- 4 This project had three main aims:
 - to gain assurance that the Council is putting in place arrangements to transform, adapt and maintain the delivery of services;
 - to explain the actions that the Council is taking both individually and in partnership to strengthen its arrangements as well as further embed the sustainable development principle; and
 - to inspire the Council and other organisations to further strengthen their arrangements through capturing and sharing notable practice examples and learning and making appropriate recommendations.
- 5 This is important because Wrexham Council invests considerable sums in its building assets and workforce. Some key information from 2020-21 is show in **Exhibit 1**.

Exhibit 1: key facts and figures relating to building assets and workforce.

Number of Council buildings owned in 2020-21	11,400 buildings of which 11,055 are housing stock in 2020-21
Value of property, as at 31 March 2021	Approximately £452 million
Number of staff	4,477
Spending on workforce	£181 million which equates to 45% of its total cost of services
Percentage of the workforce, of staff who were male	29.1%
Percentage of the workforce, of staff who were female	70.9%
Percentage of staff who work full time	51.9%
Percentage of staff who work part time	48.1%
Percentage of staff aged over 55 years	24.9%
Number of staff who left the Council by their own choice 2020-21	331

- 6 The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on demand for buildings and the way that staff work. This report examines some of these impacts and the way that the Council benefits from the positives and mitigates risks from the negative when planning future service delivery.
- 7 We undertook the review during the period December 2021 to February 2022.

What we found

- 8 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the Council's strategic approach strengthening its ability to transform? In doing this work we have identified some of the direct impact of the pandemic as well as some operational and governance issues exacerbated by the pandemic.
- 9 Overall, we found that the Council is actively working on its Modern Ways of Working Project, which impacts on both its building assets and its workforce, integrating this activity with wider strategies, and looking further ahead will strengthen the Council's consideration of the sustainable development principle and lead to improved and more complete outcomes.
- 10 We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council continues to implement its Office Accommodation Review Programme and Modern Ways of Working project, but has not yet incorporated these programmes into a corporate asset management plan that sets out the future for its building assets;
 - officers, supported by councillors are proactive in the management of assets although there are opportunities to improve processes and consistency across the Council;
 - throughout the pandemic senior managers and Executive members carefully monitored the impact of COVID19 on the Council's resources including building assets and kept staff informed;
 - the Council has workforce planning arrangements in place and will need to further develop these as it shapes its vision for the future;
 - the Council proceeds with implementation of its Modern Ways of Working project and is dealing with the impact that the pandemic has on its workforce; and
 - the Council maintains a strong overview of its workforce but has not yet fully assessed the impact of COVID-19 on its future service plans.

Recommendations

Exhibit 2: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
Post pandemic learning	
R1	Consider learning and areas for improvement from the pandemic to help inform future use of assets and workforce, where the pandemic has highlighted such opportunities. These are shown in bold text throughout the report.
Vision	
R2	Clarify the Council's vision for the shape and size of its building assets and workforce in the short, medium, and long term.
Strategies and delivery plans	
R3	Develop asset and workforce strategies and delivery plans that build on learning from the Council's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver the Council's vision in these areas.
Strategies and delivery plans	
R4	Identify the costs of delivering these plans and incorporate these into the medium-term financial plan.

Detailed report

Assets

The Council continues to implement its Office Accommodation Review Programme and Modern Ways of Working projects, but has not yet incorporated these programmes into a corporate asset management plan that sets out the future for its building assets

11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council's Modern Ways of Working project sets out its aspirations for a modern council. It expects staff to work flexibly, to work wherever is most suitable and to maximise the use of technology to work efficiently. To achieve this, the Council recognises that office layouts will need to change, and its Office Accommodation Programme sets out its priorities for work to support this change. The requirement for staff to work from home during the pandemic has meant that some offices have been mostly unoccupied, making them available for refurbishment without disrupting staff.
- commitment to modernise ways of working is included in Wexham's Council Plan 2019-22 where it states that it is continuing to modernise the services that it provides by investing in an agile workforce that requires fewer office buildings but which is supported by an improved IT infrastructure and good quality support services.
- commitment was also evident by the Council's Asset Management Strategy - April 2014 – December 2020, the Corporate Land and Buildings Strategy 2015-2020 and the Strategic Asset Management Plan 2014-2019. All these documents have now time expired and have not yet been replaced by new versions. At this stage, plans are neither long term in nature nor are they well integrated in line with expectations set out in the five ways of working under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- the recent pandemic has significantly changed the potential future landscape of the Council's building assets. **In addition to taking account of its office refurbishment programme, it will need to take account of the local town centre economy if it closes its offices, impact of technology on the way Councillors and officers work, the case for owning buildings versus renting and the size of the current estate in relation to expected demand. As more staff work from home it will need to review policies and procedures including travel and expenses and consider the health and safety of staff to ensure the Council discharges its responsibilities for their wellbeing.**

Officers, supported by councillors are proactive in the management of assets although there are opportunities to improve processes and consistency across the Council

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- in the early stages of the pandemic staff adjusted to Welsh Government COVID-19 restrictions and there were understandable reservations around having close contact with others. This had an impact on maintenance and day to day management of building assets causing some repair work to be delayed, and it has taken the Council time to catch up.
- building material prices have increased significantly which had an impact on contracts and contractors. **The Council will need to take account of these pressures as it sets its own budget and ensure that future contracts provide value for money and support its priorities around the local economy.**
- the Planning Service IT system required admin/business support officers to work from the office which resulted in some delays in accessing information. In addition, the service did not use virtual technology effectively to carry out planning consultations. **As the Council implements its Modern Ways of Working project, it will need to review accessibility of information to ensure services are less disrupted in the event of similar Welsh Government restrictions either linked to further outbreaks of COVID or other major incidents.**
- we were told about some services using technology in response to the pandemic that will change working practices in the future. For example, the Repairs Service used remote 'video assist' on refurbishment works. The system allows the Council to send a tenant a text message, which once activated by the tenant, automatically opens the camera function on their smart phone. The operator can then see what the tenant is showing them on their computer screen. This allows staff to either advise the tenant on how to repair minor defects themselves, accurately prioritise repairs or to compile accurate material lists so that the repair can be completed on the first visit. As part of its Modern Ways of Working project, **the Council will need to consider how technological developments such as this good example, can further support remote working and improve efficiency and service delivery.**
- managers and staff collaborated well through the pandemic. Some partners shared building assets and the Council took advantage of offices being largely vacant to progress its office refurbishment programme; for example, at Crown Buildings to accommodate Social Care and Education Service staff and create a 'Community Health and Wellbeing Area' with a sensory room and rooms for Health colleagues. The Council, working with Health partners set up a COVID testing centre in Memorial Hall and vaccination centres across the County Borough. Officers are also working with colleagues in

Flintshire County Council to develop a Rainbow hostel in the Flintshire area. There was a sense amongst some staff we interviewed that the pandemic had promoted a can-do attitude that some saw as 'reducing bureaucracy.' Whilst what some see as bureaucracy is essential internal control, **the Council will need to learn from the speed with which decisions were made during the pandemic to identify opportunities to streamline decision making in the future.**

- the Assets Team manages acquisition, disposal, and maintenance of building assets. This team liaises with and supports operational managers, bringing specialist skills and knowledge to the management of buildings. Officers and members spoke positively about the support they receive from the Assets Team, although they stated that better planning around acquisitions and disposals would help improve efficiency of the Team's support. The Council operates a 'Corporate Landlord' arrangement whereby buildings are owned by the Council as a whole not individual services, although running costs are met by services. The pandemic has heightened the importance of building assets in the delivery of services and the Council is clearly committed to reviewing the way it uses these resources in the future. **It is important that the Council also reviews its infrastructure that supports use of these resources to ensure maximum efficiency and value from building assets.**
- at an officer level, building assets are not co-ordinated through an officer-led asset management group as they are in many councils. The Council's Corporate Land and Buildings Strategy Group is chaired by the Leader of the Council as portfolio holder for assets and acts as a sounding board for acquisition and disposal of building assets. Officers attend the meetings to present their proposals. This group is neither a decision-making group nor is it a scrutiny committee. Even though this group is not formally constituted, the Committee services team invites agenda items, and it minutes meetings. Minutes are not accessible to the public, but minutes of decisions to acquire or dispose of land and buildings that are considered by the Council's Executive are accessible on the Council's website. **As the Council reviews the infrastructure supporting asset management, it should also take the opportunity to review the governance arrangements to ensure transparency of decision making and separation of roles between elected members and officers.**

Throughout the pandemic senior managers and Executive members carefully monitored the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's resources including building assets and kept staff informed

13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- throughout the pandemic, senior managers have received regular reports highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on services and resources. The Senior Leadership Team received verbal updates and reports on the planning service, repairs backlog, updates on controversial acquisitions, the increasing cost of materials and tenders and delays in disposals during the pandemic. Governance arrangements were affected by the pandemic, particularly in the earlier stages, but these were restored with the use of remote technology to facilitate virtual meetings. **As part of its contingency/emergency planning arrangements, the Council will need to consider the impact that the pandemic had on its governance arrangements and review whether senior managers and councillors received appropriate information during this period.**
- executive members were routinely briefed by senior managers, although the Executive Board did not receive reports setting out the impact of COVID-19 including on the Council's building assets, although in December 2021 it did receive a report on the progress of the Office Accommodation Programme. Whilst these briefings are essential for the delivery of services and wellbeing of residents, **the Council should consider opportunities to share non-confidential information more widely through its communication processes.**
- officers have continued to meet their colleagues and peers from other organisations to share experiences of the pandemic and learn from each other's approaches. The Chief Executive has held virtual all staff briefings with staff throughout the pandemic and these have included reference to the future use of offices and working practices. Managers have also met with staff to discuss future working patterns and their preferred office usage. And, as part of the refurbishment of Crown Buildings some staff have been involved in choosing furnishings and design of the office.
- during the pandemic it has been difficult to maintain the level of staff and councillor involvement that would have been seen in more normal times. The Council has worked hard to main communication in these very difficult times. **As it progresses its Modern Ways of Working project the Council should review the positive and less positive experiences to consider whether, in the event of another major event, it could be better prepared to engage, involve, and communicate better with staff and councillors.**

Workforce

The Council has workforce planning arrangements in place and will need to further develop these as it shapes its vision for the future

14 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has a track record of workforce planning. Its Workforce Plan – 2020-2021 set out the workforce issues faced by the Council last year and actions it needed to take. It was supported by the Organisation Development & Workforce Strategy 2017-2022 and the Workforce Management Information Report 2019-2020. This shows commitment to workforce planning and although the current workforce plan has not been developed for 2022-23, delay is understandable given the pandemic.
- the Council's Human Resources business partners are currently working with managers to assess their workforce needs, incorporate these into a workforce plan that integrates with the service plans. **Workforce plans will also need to integrate more widely with other plans including the Modern Ways of Working Project and Office Accommodation Programme.**
- the Council's Risk Register records risks around workforce. These include risks that the Council lacks the knowledge, skills, capacity, culture, and ability to modernise in order to continue to meet its priorities and responsibilities, the risk that services are unable to respond adequately to service initiatives or changes to services and legal requirements, and the risk of inadequate workforce development across the Council. The risk register includes mitigating actions, and **the Council will need to consider the implications of these when developing its new workforce plan.**
- Wrexham Council has seen the departure of many of its senior managers over recent years and the current senior leadership team has the potential to benefit from many experienced external appointments. With the local government elections in May 2022, the administration, together with the new but experienced senior leadership team should be well placed to set out the Council's vision for the future workforce including its plans for a 'One Council' ethos to remove silo working.
- the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a duty on public bodies to plan for the short, medium, and long term. As detailed above, the Council plans on an annual basis. Whilst the Modern Ways of Working project signals a different way of working it does not fundamentally change the shape of the workforce. **The Council will need to consider how far into the future it is reasonable to set out its plans for the workforce and what skills, knowledge, and staff capacity it will need over that period.**

The Council proceeds with implementation of its Modern Ways of Working project and is dealing with the impact that the pandemic has on its workforce

15 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Human Resources (HR) Team has worked hard to support staff and combat the impact of the pandemic. Business partners have worked closely with operational managers providing HR support.
- delivery of the Modern Ways of Working project has progressed throughout the pandemic. The Council has recruited Modern Ways of Working champions, produced Modern Ways of Working guidance, and agreed an action plan to support delivery.
- in the early stages of the pandemic, many staff adjusted to working from home, some were unable to work because the services they delivered were suspended and some staff were redeployed to other duties. This was an unprecedented set of circumstances which, coupled with personal and family commitments, placed many in the workforce under significant pressure. Most staff have now returned to their normal duties, although still operating under the challenges posed by the pandemic such isolation and ongoing concerns about COVID-19.
- in line with legislation, staff have been required to work from home where possible. This has required staff to work very differently and has caused extra stress, particularly for staff with caring responsibilities and the added pressure of home tutoring. The Council required managers to allow staff to work flexibly and recognise that some days staff will not be able to 'put in their 'full shift.' Whilst for many, this new way of working has been successful, and it is likely that many staff will spend time in future working from a mix of home, usual workplace or on site, for others we heard concerns about its operation in practice. One person we interviewed described working from home as 'staff being on paid holiday' and we heard of some managers insisting that staff work in the office even though they could work from home. Whilst it is difficult for any organisation the size of the Council to ensure consistent compliance with directives especially when there is room for interpretation, **the Council should consider how it addresses these cultural challenges as it proceeds with its Modern Ways of Working project.**
- working from home also brings with it some practical challenges. Knowing when or how officers can be contacted is difficult especially when staff are working non-standard hours to accommodate caring responsibilities. We heard that some staff were reluctant to share their home phone numbers, which made it difficult for colleagues to contact them. And if staff are working from home, how is their privacy protected when they are customer facing? **The Council should develop a protocol setting out its expectations of how and when staff should be contactable when working from home.**

- for those staff who were unable to work from home and whose services operated through the pandemic, they faced different challenges. The Council risk assessed staff who needed face to face interaction with the public and provided protective equipment and changed working practices to keep staff and the public safe. Waste collection staff who by necessity share the same space in the refuse vehicle introduced their own 'small buddy groups' to limit transmission of COVID-19 amongst crew members. And whilst trade union representation continued throughout the pandemic with the aid of remote technology, the opportunity to provide comfort and support during difficult meetings such as grievance and disciplinary hearings increased the pressure on some staff.
- social care staff have been particularly affected by the pandemic. Domiciliary care staff have been at the forefront, working with particularly vulnerable service users, at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 themselves and working, as they do, often isolated from colleagues. Social workers have also worked throughout. With the added pressures of increasing workloads and recent child deaths in the United Kingdom reported in the media emphasising the importance of sound safeguarding practice, there has been an increased the fear of 'getting it wrong.'
- staff recruitment challenges have continued through the pandemic with resultant staff shortages. Competition for social workers and domiciliary care workers is recognised as a regional and national concern with pay, and competition for agency staff quoted as significant factors. And it is not only the public sector that is affected; one provider has recently withdrawn from its contract, returning responsibility for meeting care needs to the Council. The Council has worked hard to recruit care staff. It has sought to recruit through different means including the use of social media, by holding a jobs fair and it has produced a promotional recruitment video. It also developed a Children's Social Care Recruitment Retention Strategy and Action Plan in July 2021 that sets out aims and measures of success.
- other Council services have also experienced recruitment difficulties, particularly where technical skills that are in short supply are needed such as in procurement, civil engineering, and drivers for heavy goods vehicles. For some, the pandemic and increased use of remote access have allowed staff to work in other parts of Wales without needing to commute daily, which means that Wrexham can aim to attract new recruits from afar if it wishes. Another challenge for Wrexham is its geographic location; on the English border it further competes for staff with neighbouring English councils. The Council understands these challenges around recruitment of staff and **will need to ensure that potential solutions are included in workforce plans to prevent the consequences for service delivery and the impact on residents.**
- sickness absence has been affected by the pandemic. Some services where face to face contact is necessary have seen increased levels of sickness, and other services where staff have worked from home have seen a

reduction in sickness levels. Managers told us that stress has become the main reason for absence and is the consequence of several factors. For example, staff who in the past might have carried out a challenging and uncomfortable meeting with a member of the public would have returned to the office where they might receive peer support. Where these staff are working from home, colleagues will not be there to notice the signs of anxiety and stress and the staff member will often be left unsupported. Front line staff and senior managers who have worked throughout to keep services operational and co-ordinate activity to combat the impact of the pandemic may now be feeling fatigued and the effects of long-term stress. Managers understand the impact of COVID-19 on staff sickness within their services, but **the Council needs to collate this information to ensure these factors are addressed through the workforce plan.**

- the pandemic has also provided opportunities. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has underpinned the work of the Council during the pandemic. If there were barriers to using remote technology in the past, these were overcome. Staff have been supported to work from home and schools have supported pupils with remote access. Some peripatetic staff who in the past drove to various schools to visit the same child in the same week have found enough efficiencies through remote technology to meet the children without travelling and now have capacity to meet parents, which has enhanced the outreach service. In the Pupil Referral Unit, technology has transformed learning for some pupils who in the past would have been reluctant to join in class learning but are now happy to contribute using remote technology. **The Council should explore the benefits that have been realised through the increased use of ICT during the pandemic, to identify wider opportunities in other services and review the capacity of the ICT service to continue to maintain and deliver improvements.**

The Council maintains a strong overview of its workforce but has not yet fully assessed the impact of COVID-19 on its future service plans

16 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Head of Service HR & OD is a member of the Senior Leadership Team and was able to offer specialist HR advice as issues arose during the pandemic. The Senior Leadership Team has received regular reports throughout the pandemic on workforce issues including progress with implementation of the Modern Ways of Working project.
- in the early stages of the pandemic, all Council meetings including Executive Board were suspended. Executive Board resumed in June 2020 and for two months it received reports on COVID-19 and recovery planning. Since then, it has received no further reports relating to the impact of the pandemic.

- scrutiny committee members have considered reports on the impact of COVID-19, and the Council's recovery plans. In December 2020, the Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee received a report titled 'Modern Ways of Working and Workforce COVID19 Response' to provide members with an overview of the workforce considerations and arrangements put in place in responding to the coronavirus pandemic and the acceleration of implementation of parts of the Modern Ways of Working programme. The committee received a further report on COVID-19 Recovery in April 2021 and November 2021.
- officers have continued to meet with peers in other councils and trade union representatives to discuss emerging issues in relation to the workforce, and national benchmarking information is available through InfoBaseCymru¹.
- the Council has engaged with staff regularly throughout the pandemic, all staff had a one-to-one meeting in late summer to check on their wellbeing. In November 2020, the employee survey asked questions in relation to homeworking and gave employees an opportunity to feed back about their experiences of working during the pandemic. The survey was completed by 1,012 staff representing every service.

¹ InfoBaseCymru is developed, supported and hosted by the Local Government Data Unit – Wales, to provide easy access to information for Wales, using maps and tables.



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