

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Report to the Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Meeting Date:	9 November 2021
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Craig ab Iago
Contact Officer:	Carys Fôn Williams
Contact Number:	01341 424368
Item Title:	PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PROPERTY

DECISION SOUGHT

To accept and note the information in the report.

THE REASON WHY A DECISION IS NEEDED

In order to ensure effective performance management.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update my fellow members on what has happened in the areas for which I am responsible as the Cabinet Member for Housing and Property. This includes outlining the latest developments to date in 2021-22 against the pledges within the 2018-2023 Gwynedd Council Plan; issues and the progress of performance measures; and the latest on the savings and cuts schemes.
- 1.2 I remind you that all the issues have already been the subject of discussion and scrutiny by me at a meeting of the Housing and Property Management Team, which also included representatives from the Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.3 I am generally happy with the progress of the Departments projects within the Council Plan and the performance measures for which I am responsible.

2. GWYNEDD COUNCIL PLAN PROJECTS 2018-2023

2.1 A shortage of suitable homes for the people of Gwynedd: Secure approval for the Housing Plan and begin implementation.

The Housing Action Plan was approved by Cabinet on 15 December 2020. Since then, the Department has recruited and appointed experienced officers to deliver the 33 projects in the Action Plan, and project arrangements have been put in place.



The Department has already initiated several projects such as:

- Grants for first time buyers to renovate empty homes. Launched in June and nearly 50 applicants are in the application process.
- £1 million has been allocated to the Homebuy Scheme (equity loan) and we are looking to expand this scheme.
- Homelessness plans - construction work currently underway to develop 30 Units including 4 'pods' in Caernarfon for vulnerable individuals and development of the former Natwest site in Caernarfon which will include supported apartments for homeless youth.
- Grants for adaptations to make houses suitable for people with disabilities - 227 completed to date.
- We are currently looking at land and having discussions about buying land to develop our own homes.
- We are also looking at a number of houses on the market to purchase and let to local people at affordable rent.

Although we hope to buy our first homes soon, I think it is important to note that the current housing crisis has affected the Department's ability to implement the scheme to purchase houses to let to local people. The rise in house prices means that our original business case is no longer viable. The Department is currently revisiting the business case and looking at options for additional funding for this scheme.

One of the Housing Action Plan's projects is to 'Consult with communities to establish their housing needs' which is now part of a wider consultation exercise led by the Economy and Community Department. The outcome of this consultation will enable the department to identify the areas of need for different projects to enable them to prioritise these areas.

2.2 **Easy and clear access to an advice and enquiries service on housing matters: Establishing a single front door and helpdesk for the public in order to help them with their housing problems:**

The Department is in the process of setting up our single front door and helpdesk for housing services. A report was presented to the Scrutiny Committee on the 30th September which was approved by the Committee with a request for the Department to consider the points raised during the meeting.

The Department will be taking this work forward and scoping and consulting with stakeholders such as other Departments within the Council, Housing Associations and 3rd Sector organisations in Gwynedd. The importance of getting this right first time was noted by the Scrutiny Committee and therefore the preparatory work that the Department will be doing is fundamental in order to maximise the opportunities to streamline the process for users when making inquiries or seeking access housing services. Inclusion and digital systems will be vital to the project.

2.3 **Allocating social housing to local people: Creating a new allocations policy for the county which will give greater priority to local people.**

The Common Housing Allocation Policy was introduced in October 2020, following a period of consultation and scrutiny both internally and with external partners.



It was intended from the outset to review the implementation of the policy following its adoption, and to implement it for a period of 12 months to ensure that it operated in accordance with the original objectives. The Common Housing Allocation Policy will be discussed by the Scrutiny Committee in early 2022.

One of the Department's performance measures is the percentage of all social housing let to a person with a local connection. During September, 100% of installations were let to people with a local connection. The figure has been steady over 95% in recent months with the exception of June where the figure was 92%.

2.4 Other risks

There are some risks to the Department at the moment which I need to highlight.

- 2.4.1 Demand for the services of our Homelessness Teams has increased significantly in recent months. At the outset of the pandemic, the Welsh Government abolished the 'priority need' condition when considering homelessness referrals, requiring Local Authorities to house all who presented as homeless and to ensure that no-one was sleeping rough. We have succeeded in doing so. The increase in homeless numbers has been alarming and has been a significant strain on staff. The Department has now been able to increase the capacity of the team which provides support to individuals to establish tenancies in order to move forward to cope with the increase. In addition, they are in the process of trying to increase the capacity of the preventative team to reduce the number of submissions that reach the Department in the first place. The number of homeless presentations over recent years is set out in the table below:

Year	Number of Homeless Presentations
2018/2019	576
2019/2020	593
2020/2021	812
2021/2022	452 (6 months)

We are currently in receipt of a grant from the Welsh Government to meet the accommodation costs. The requirement to house all those presenting as homeless may well continue into the future and the Government has not yet stated whether the Hardship Grant will be available to Authorities beyond March 2022. There is therefore a risk that the Council will have to meet these additional accommodation costs from next financial year. Over the last 6 months, our temporary accommodation costs has been close to £1 million. The Department's Officers are in regular discussions with the Welsh Government requesting an update on the future of this grant and emphasising the risk to the Authority should the grant not continue. Confirmation of the Welsh Government's intention has not yet been received.

There are a number of projects in the pipeline that will increase supported accommodation options but with the latest increase in presentations, this is likely to be insufficient. The table below summarises the projects underway to add to the capacity of our existing hostels, which will reduce reliance on temporary accommodation:



Project	Number of Units	Timescales
35 College Road, Bangor	3	On site, completion November 2021
Pods, Segontium, Caernarfon	4	On site, completion October 2021
137 High Street, Bangor	12	Building work begins in October 2021, aiming to complete October 2022.
Specialist accommodation with support for women	5	Completed and opening October 2021
Accommodation for a family and individual in Pwllheli	2	On site, completion February 2022
Glanwnion, Dolgellau	4	Planning permission refused by Snowdonia National Park. Awaiting appeal result.
Total:	30	

2.4.2 The Department has also seen the impact of Covid and Brexit on construction and planned maintenance projects. Over the past few months the Department has struggled to attract contractors to tender for work, and when tenders are received, they are often much higher than estimated. This mainly poses 3 risks:

- Failure to deliver on time
- Failure to deliver on budget
- Unable to spend grant funding - risk of withdrawal if not spent within agreed timescale

Due to the current instability in the market, the Department has decided to prioritise and delay some projects as the prices received are significantly higher than anticipated (some over 200% of budget). There are some projects where we cannot delay, e.g. urgent maintenance, and so these will continue. By doing this we will receive less for our money and the budget will be affected. The Department's intention is to test the market on a phased basis over the coming months to see if the market is stabilising. This is currently being done by tendering projects that have in-house work only, as we are coming to the winter season.

Should there be no sign of the market stabilising, consideration will need to be given to what action to take - whether applying for additional funding or delivering fewer projects.

If there is still a lack of interest from Contractors then alternative arrangements for tendering and procuring the services will also need to be considered.

The increase in costs and availability of contractors has been raised in a number of conversations with the Welsh Government, whether for housing capital projects or 21st Century Schools projects. I am also aware that this is having an impact on a number of other Council departments and other Local Authorities.

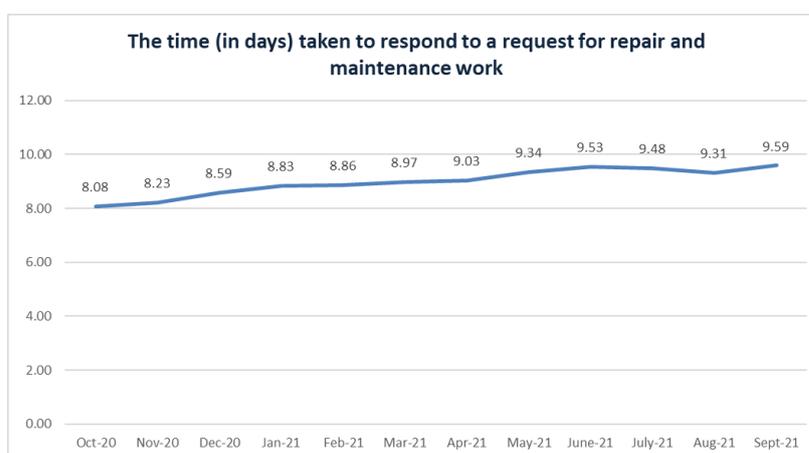
2.4.3 One of the other risks I am keen to highlight is the knock on effects of climate change. The Department is undertaking some good work in the climate change field specifically in reducing carbon emissions from Council activities. Since the introduction of the first Carbon Management Plan in 2010, the Department has been successful in ensuring that our carbon emissions have reduced by 46.6% (2019). 2020 data shows that carbon emissions reduced by 58.5%, but it is not possible to quantify the effect of the lockdown and working from home on the data for this year. The Energy Conservation Unit has recently been working with the Welsh

Government Energy Service on a report on decarbonisation of the Council's estate and Carbon Management Plan 3.

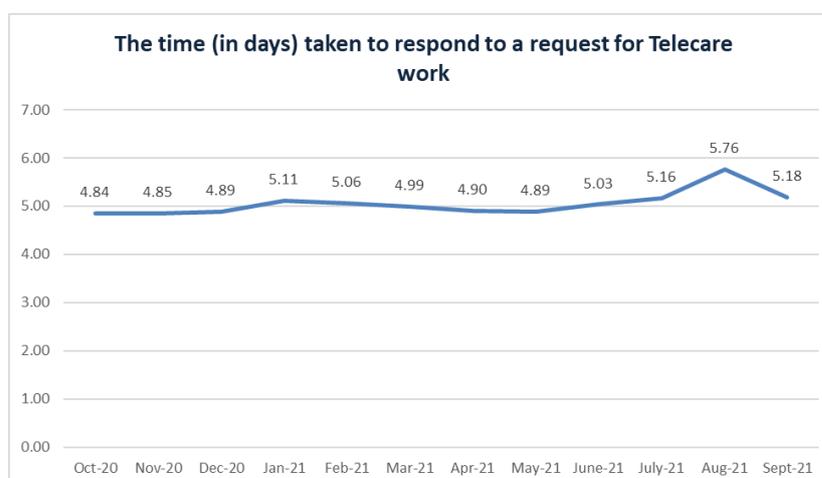
3. PERFORMANCE

The main issues arising from the Department's performance measures are summarised below. This does not refer to all the Departments Units and services, only those that I feel need to be highlighted at this time. All the measures are challenged by me once a month and I'm generally happy with the performance.

- 3.1 The time taken to respond to a **repair and maintenance** request has increased in recent months, and since the beginning of the pandemic. While it had stabilised at around 7 days pre-Covid, it is now over **9 days**. Although this is quite a significant increase (25%) there are worthy reasons for it and therefore I am not concerned. A number of the Unit's staff have been on loan to other Departments in response to the pandemic, and also, access to sites and for contractors and the internal workforce is more challenging with restrictions in place. The Unit has also seen the impact of the pandemic and Brexit on the availability of goods which has resulted in longer periods before Contractors can sometimes complete their work.



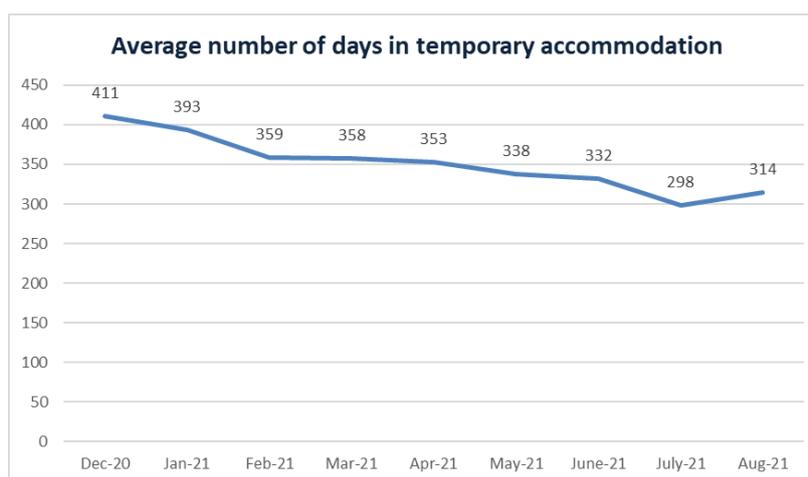
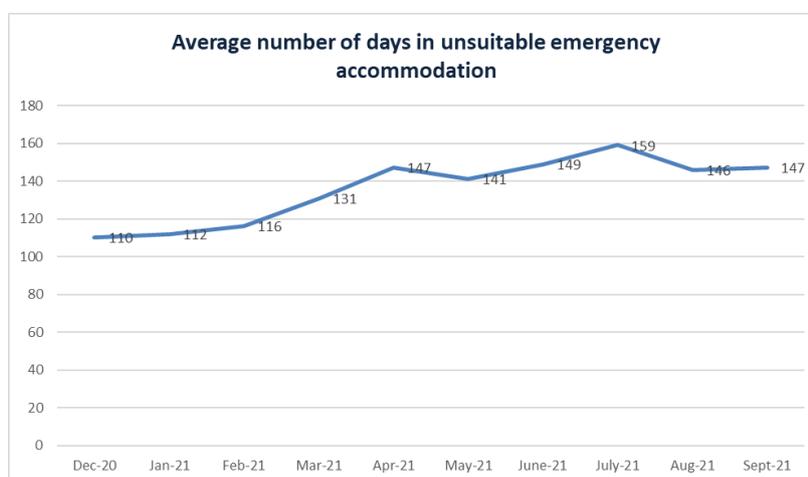
The number of days it takes to respond to a request for **Telecare** work is affected in the same way, with the average number of days now being **5 days**, compared to an average of 4 days before Covid.



- 3.2 It is good to see positive customer feedback for various Units within the Department. The Department regularly conducts a **customer satisfaction** exercise for the service offered by a number of Units such as Pest Control, Maintenance, Offices, Cleaning, Estates and

Enforcement and licensing of houses in multiple occupation. When Units receive constructive feedback, I am confident that they take action to improve the service to their customers.

- 3.3 The percentage of **Property Development Unit** projects progressing on schedule after the full brief has been agreed has reduced recently, due to the reasons highlighted as high risk to the Department, namely the lack of interest from Contractors in construction projects as well as the high prices we receive when Contractors submit prices. Just six months ago the Unit was delivering 96% of its projects on schedule but that has now reduced to 87%. However, I accept that the reasons for the delays are beyond the control of the Unit.
- 3.4 The increase in homelessness is also reflected in the Department's performance measures, with the average number of days in unsuitable emergency accommodation (eg bed and breakfast) being **147 days**, and the average number of days in temporary house (private houses leased by us) at **314 days**. It is hoped that the increased capacity of the team to support individuals to maintain their own tenancy will lead to more individuals moving forward more quickly, and reduce reliance on unsuitable emergency accommodation and temporary accommodation.



- 3.5 **The average number of days on a social housing waiting list** is currently high - **679 days**. Demand for social housing is high, but also contributes to this high figure is that examples of applicants who have been on the register for a long time under the old points system are now given greater priority in the new banding system.

4. OFFICES

The Facilities Unit, which is responsible for our offices, is working with other departments to look at the council's future working arrangements. As part of this work, we will include looking at options to reduce the estate from a change in working arrangements. This work is ongoing and we do not know at this stage how our future working arrangements will affect the demand for office space.

5. FINANCIAL SITUATION / SAVINGS

- 5.1 The Housing and Property Department's underspend was £75,000 at the end of the 2020/21 financial year. A detailed review of the Department's financial situation in 2021/22 was held recently as part of a revenue review at the end of August for the entire Council. It is anticipated that the Department will underspend by £175,000 by the end of the 2021/22 financial year. Despite an overspend that is forecast for Homelessness, the main reason for the underspend on a departmental level is staff turnover and vacant posts. The Review of the Revenue Budget was reported to the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 October.
- 5.2 The Department has two Savings plans during 2021/22.
- 5.3 Inspection and licensing fees for houses in multiple occupation have increased from £140 to £180 per room and the department is on track to achieve these savings.
- 5.4 The Department is also on track to achieve the savings of reducing reliance on temporary accommodation by investing in purpose built accommodation. As a result of Covid 19, the program was delayed, but the pods in Caernarfon are now ready and other units in Bangor will be ready by November. Further plans are then being made to convert flats and create additional units which will hopefully be sufficient to meet the target. Welsh Government policy during the Covid pandemic has had an impact on this area, and there is some uncertainty going forward regarding the level of assistance Gwynedd Council will need to provide to the homeless after April 2022, as highlighted earlier in the report.

VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

The Monitoring Officer :

No observations to add in relation to propriety

Head of Finance:

I confirm that £1m has been earmarked for the Help to Buy Scheme in this year's Capital Programme. The review of the Capital Programme, which was presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 October, also highlights the slippages, in the programmed plans that are likely to take place this year, as set out in paragraph 2.4.2.

As the report notes, expenditure on accommodation has increased significantly since the start of the pandemic, but these additional costs have been greeted through the Welsh Government's Hardship Grant to date. There is a real risk that the Hardship Grant will not continue after April 2022, although local authorities will still be required by the Welsh Government to "house everyone", and so to this end the Department has submitted a bid as part of the bidding procedure to assist with this.

I confirm that the Department's savings plans are on track to be delivered this year.

