

# Ffordd Gwynedd Plan 2023-28

## Annual Report 2024/25



# CONTENT

Introduction	03
Learn, Experiment and Act to Improve	04
Leadership	05
Understand and Improve Performance	06
Support and Develop	07
Digital Transformation	08
Workforce Planning and Talent Development	09
Continious Appraisal	10
A Satisfied and Healthy Workforce	11
Customer Contact	12
Conclusions	13

# INTRODUCTION

The Ffordd Gwynedd Plan and Work Programme for the 2023-28 period was adopted by the Council Cabinet at its meeting on 7 March, 2023. Nine work streams were confirmed as priorities for the development of the organisation within the Council in that Plan with a commitment to publishing an annual report on the future progress of the work.

This is the second in a series of reports due to be published in each of the five years of the Plan period.

As part of a new governance structure for the implementation of the Plan, the Ffordd Gwynedd Lead Group (comprising all members of the Council's Corporate Management Team) was established. That Group was only able to meet on two occasions during the first year of the current Plan and as a result, it was decided to incorporate that lead function as a fixed item on the monthly agenda of the Corporate Management Team meetings. It was arranged to focus on one of the individual workstreams at each monthly meeting since November 2024 and that has allowed for a better opportunity to keep a constant overview of progress.

Furthermore, a Practitioners' Group was established to share best practice in relation to developing the culture and reviewing work systems. That Group has a strong and numerous membership but it is continuing to get to grips with the objectives for which it was established. The Group has now been redesignated as an Experimentation and Improvement Group and efforts are being made to convene the Group more regularly in the future in order to seek to take full advantage of the experiences of different services in developing the "way of working".

The Officers' Group continues as part of the governance structure. This is the Group that includes officers who lead on the individual work streams and offer departments the support for promoting the culture and associated work methods including the learning and development support that is key in all this.

The real success of this Plan in reality is to be assured, through the performance measures and feedback received, that the developments and work realised lead to improved services. This report is based on two main information sources on which to base the conclusions.

The most recent departmental self-assessments have largely identified issues such as rooting the practice of conducting ongoing evaluations, extending the basic "way of working" training, improving contact with the frontline and ensuring that performance monitoring is not seen as the need to report solely to others.

The Council places considerable emphasis on gathering the opinion of staff to identify how the Council is perceived as an employer. The results are shared with Heads of Department and management teams across the Council, so that they have the opportunity to respond to the main messages or any specific challenge at corporate and departmental level.

The latest annual Voice of Staff Survey has therefore clearly informed what is to be prioritised in the year ahead, with specific comments arising from responses on celebrating success and appreciating work, raising awareness about staff benefits, promoting work-life balance and providing opportunities to voice opinions on developments.

Here is more detail on the developments and feedback in relation to the nine individual work streams.



## Learn, Experiment and Act to Improve

The Practitioner Group was re-established as an Experimentation and Improvement Group during the year with the intention of stimulating greater sharing of best practice and lessons learned. A register of reviews is kept which is carried out across the Council and that register shows that reviews of systems and processes are being carried out in certain service units in all departments within the Council.

The emphasis in the current Plan on carrying out reviews on smaller pieces of work systems, as well as carrying out reviews on whole systems, appears to have borne fruit and every Council Department is able to provide examples of reviews that have led to improvements during the year e.g. two comprehensive reviews being carried out within the Finance Department (Income and Council Tax) while there are several examples within the Economy and Community Department which demonstrate how many services have learned, experimented and taken action to improve in the past year. A number of the improvements relate to the use of technology with developments relating to the use of artificial intelligence becoming increasingly evident e.g. The Licensing Team within Public Protection has seen an improvement in the handling time of taxi licence applications following the development and introduction of a specific electronic system.

It was highlighted in the feedback from the self-assessment that gaining true ownership of the need to learn, experiment and improve amongst sections of the front-line workforce can be challenging and there is a need to recognise that the expected progress is not consistently realised in this context and that the Experimentation and Improvement Group needs to lead the efforts to promote this work and highlight the robust improvements resulting from the reviews being undertaken.





## Leadership

All Departments without exception recognises that “leading” rather than “managing” is the aim and practice of most managers but there is a recognition that change is less well-embedded in all services. In that regard, the need for training is being seen as part of the further movement to ensure that leadership is the norm and expectation when one joins the Council.

The Corporate Management Team has held two full-day sessions during the year to develop as a team of leaders in the Council and Cabinet members have invested their time in personal development and as a team during the year with a clear intention to further build on that development during 2025/26. The Senior Leadership Programme, which has been delivered to the Corporate Management Team, adds to the support available to develop leadership skills and knowledge – this includes working with Academi Cymru and taking advantage of development materials from SOLACE.

The new Ffordd Gwynedd training programme has been reintroduced for managers during the year while the Manager Development Programme is going from strength to strength with the positive feedback from attendees, and the fact that a number of the 36 (who have already completed the programme) have subsequently been promoted speaks for itself. The Women in Leadership Programme, which continues to be offered, has seen the same success, with the percentage of women in management positions in the Council having increased to 43% (from 41% in 23/24).

Two series of the Managers and Team Leaders Network took place with items and discussions on issues such as cross-departmental collaboration, well-being strategy, celebrating success, understanding and improving performance, managing absences and the practice of carrying out reviews of work systems.

A Forum for Assistant Heads of Services was first established within the Council as a result of identifying a gap in the opportunities for this cohort of senior managers to come together, again to share experiences and contribute to the development of the organisation. The Forum has met on three occasions during 2024/25 with a number of the items submitted to the Managers Network also being addressed there.

A growing number of departments are running developmental activities for managers and leaders and all of this is an additional contribution to embedding the way of working and, crucially, to promoting leadership rather than management e.g. “Rising Leaders” in the museums sector, “SOCItM Leadership Academy” within IT





## Understand and Improve Performance

It was highlighted last year that several departments highlight the need to ensure an understanding, among officers, of the difference between reporting and performance management. The emphasis remains within a number of services on the need to collect and analyse performance details in preparation for meetings to challenge and support the Cabinet Member rather than for improving provision. A short presentation was organised in the November 2024 series of the Managers Network to raise awareness of this difference and encourage managers to discuss performance with their teams on a regular basis.

An example of how some departments are trying to promote this further is inviting members of individual services to attend performance challenging and support meetings with their manager in order to contribute to the discussion and showcase their understanding of how the service unit is performing e.g. Corporate Services.

However, the feedback from the self-assessment and voice of staff survey confirms that not all staff are aware of what is reported on their Service performance or do not receive feedback from the performance challenging and support meetings, where progress and developments within their area of work are being dealt with and discussed.

There are other examples where a discussion on performance is a constant part of individual team meetings but it is accepted that further effort is needed to embed these best practices and ensure that all staff understand and accept responsibility for improving performance within their Service.

Furthermore, the formal Cabinet Member performance reports will be submitted to meetings of the appropriate Scrutiny Committee rather than to meetings of the Cabinet itself from June 2025 onwards, with the performance measures of each Service being regularly published on the Council's website as a result. This development is again seen as another means of promoting ownership of performance within teams across the Council.



## Support and Develop

There is significant investment within the Council into staff development at corporate, departmental and individual service level. Several departments report that there is a focus on supporting specialist and professional training more often than not and that awareness needs to be raised of the training provided corporately in order for individuals to take greater advantage of what is offered.

It is considered by several Departments that one reason why the culture of Ffordd Gwynedd has not been fully rooted everywhere to date is the fact that not all officers have had the opportunity to undertake training on the “way of working”. That refreshed training has now been piloted with different cohorts of staff and Members and an intensive programme of training will be offered from September 2025 which will be a combination of face-to-face training sessions and e-learning.

A new Learning and Development Framework has been launched with the programme for the first year focusing on basic training such as finance management, well-being and digital skills.

The content of this framework is primarily based on the needs identified within the departments with a programme over the next three years in the pipeline to further develop the programme and add to what is offered.

The Senior Leadership Programme, the Manager Development Programme and the Women in Leadership Programme continue to demonstrate their value with a large number of officers eager to sign up on each occasion when a new series is announced.

There is also strong evidence from the departments demonstrating that the continuous development of staff is a priority within the services with specialist development opportunities at local, regional and national level. A particular appreciation of the support to develop Welsh language skills was noted by more than one Department.

One frustration identified in this area is the lack of availability of digital accounts in order to facilitate frontline staff access to e-learning provision. It is recognised that this needs further attention and the Digital Transformation Board's work programme has identified the task as one of its priorities for the next period. The Workforce Sub-Group has already gathered the necessary details from staff with a view to taking action in the coming year.







## Digital Transformation

The corporate Digital Plan for 2023-38 was approved by the Cabinet on 7 November, 2023. The period of this Plan coincides with the period of the Council Plan and Digital Transformation has been identified as an improvement priority in that Plan. Funding has already been secured to drive the first two-year work programme of the Digital Plan with priorities for that period including a new integrated telephone system, a new organisation and payroll management system, upgrading the corporate website, ensuring access to a digital account for all Council staff and developing the responsible use of artificial intelligence.

Furthermore, events during the year have identified the need for us to add cyber security to those priorities and attention has already been given to corporate governance arrangements in that regard i.e. two groups have been established that will consider specific aspects of this threat – one will look at defence against attacks on our systems and will be accountable to the Digital Transformation Board and the other will focus on our response to a cyber security attack in relation to continuity of service and reporting to the Strategic Panel on Emergency Plans. The Corporate Management Team and the Leadership Team, in turn, will receive regular updates on the work of both groups to assure us of our ability to cope with this growing threat.

As for the other priorities, the following progress can be reported;

- A new telephone system has already been purchased and released to a cohort of staff with forecasts that the whole Council (including schools) will have transitioned to the new system by October 2025.
- Preparatory work for ordering a new organisation management and payroll system has been completed with the intention of determining a system provider by September 2025 and implementing the system from October 2026.
- Accessibility as well as the ability to search for information on the corporate website has been significantly upgraded with the launch of the redesigned website and intranet to follow during the first half of 2025/26.

Beyond these priorities, developments within individual departments/services have taken place e.g.

- Promote the use of credit cards instead of cash accounts and move away from cheques altogether using the BACS electronics method within the Finance Department
- develop 'Power app' to record and create school support visit reports and a dashboard to present, monitor and evaluate learner group data in the Education Department.







## Workforce Planning and Talent Development

7 work sub-streams have been identified for driving this work forward. They range from conducting a “Ffordd Gwynedd” exercise on the whole process of attracting staff to work for the Council to the need to establish specific training plans that address rare skills and expertise, as well as the appropriate behaviours that are necessary to the future continuity of service.

The work carried out during the year includes the establishment of a new Work Experience Scheme and ensuring up-to-date information on mandatory training for all members of staff.

Furthermore, the talent development schemes that the Council has are going from strength to strength. With over 20 new jobs available in the year, there were almost 130 unique applications for apprentice and professional trainee job opportunities. The quality of the applications received was better than ever. The offer of diverse opportunities across different areas within the Council has meant that the Council has 43 apprentices and 18 professional trainees during 2024/25.

The majority of individuals who have completed these schemes are now in full-time positions in various fields, including systems engineering, electrical, digital programming, legal, events and accounting. The success of these schemes continues to strengthen the Council's talent base and are recognised as a key strategic tool in planning the workforce for the future while the arrival of the Care Academy during the year has enriched the provision even further.

A number of Council Services have taken advantage of these schemes, with the applications approved being those that can demonstrate the need to invest in order to fill anticipated gaps thereby ensuring continuity of service.

However, it is recognised that a number of the other sub work streams under this heading have not been realised and that is subject to a significant additional time investment at the beginning of 2025/26, in particular the work relating to identifying progression to key posts and undertake a review of staff recruitment arrangements for the Council's workforce.





## Continuous Appraisal

The adopted Plan states that we want to ensure timely and effective evaluation in all services across the Council.

Regular conversations and meetings between a manager and a member of staff take place in most services, but it cannot be stated that those conversations are tantamount to an evaluation of performance and needs on a personal level. The practice of evaluation has not been embedded and there is no regular discussion on an individual's conduct, even within those services where it is considered that continuous evaluation takes place.

It is clear that further guidance is needed on how to get the most out of an evaluation discussion, how to record the actions agreed and also how to tie the conclusions with staff development plans. The management teams of each Department have received a presentation on the guidance available i.e. it is proposed that an evaluation discussion be divided into three parts – the well-being of the member of staff, work programme and personal development. Access to that guidance is available to all officers on the Council's intranet.

There will be an official launch of all supporting materials in September 2025 with the requirement of ongoing evaluation for all officers in the Council.





## A Satisfied and Healthy Workforce

The health and well-being of staff is at the core of our ability as a Council to meet the needs of the people of the County. There is comprehensive support available to promote and support health and well-being but it was highlighted in the feedback from the 23/24 Voice of Staff Survey that the provision is not obvious to everyone and the information needs to be disseminated and permeated into all parts of the Council's activity. The responses to the latest Voice of Staff Survey confirm that the efforts to raise awareness in this context have borne fruit and that more staff are now aware of the support that is now available.

A new Well-being Strategy was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on December 17, 2024. The Strategy is based on three pillars, namely leadership and management, sustainable support and a work environment with mental, physical, social and financial well-being at the heart of what is sought to be achieved.

The corporate Occupational Health Unit leads and drives the programme of supporting health and well-being but we all have the responsibility to look after our own health and to support colleagues when situations require it. The Unit has continued to undertake a tour around frontline workplaces such as Depos, Residential Homes etc, raising awareness of the support available and carrying out health checks. But, crucially, the activity to support well-being is not confined to the corporate effort and there are several examples of trying to promote well-being within the departments e.g.

- the Environment Department has carried out a 16-week exercise plan with the specialist support of leisure centre staff
- the Children and Supporting Families Department has held workshops for employees on staff well-being

The level of absences has increased again however on a whole-Council basis, increasing from an average of 10.29 days per head in 2023/24 to 12.94 days per head at the end of 2024/25. New absence management arrangements have been introduced during the year while an Absences Group has been established and is focusing on the main reasons for sickness absences with a view to introducing and implementing the proactive actions set out in the Well-being Strategy as well as providing timely data to managers.

Addressing this area has been identified as one of the top priorities of the Organisation Development Plan in the year ahead.







## Customer Contact

A cross-departmental Group has been established to draw up a Customer Contact Charter. That Charter, in its final draft form, will be submitted to Cabinet for adoption on 8 July, 2025. There has been comprehensive consultation on the content of the Charter across Council services and this is a good example of seeking views on developments with staff.

A communication plan is in place to ensure awareness of the content across the Council with training to follow as a result of the approval of the Charter. The standards that can be expected will be a gauge of our future performance and will be monitored regularly in an effort to offer guidance and a timely response to queries on all occasions.

Several consultations have taken place during the year and there is widespread use of the corporate expertise available within the Communications and Engagement Service e.g. Residents Survey, Single Transferable Vote system, Flooding Strategy and Dinas Dinlle Car Park

Furthermore, some of the frontline services are seeking views on some of our day-to-day services through questionnaires in the workplaces e.g. country parks, museums, records office and the maritime service while central services have introduced a number of performance measures based on the satisfaction of the internal customers for whom support is provided.

Securing numerous responses to the bulk of public consultations continues to prove difficult but a group of officers meet monthly to try to anticipate the consultation requirements and reduce the number of individual consultations held.

Also noted here is the feedback from the Staff Voice Survey regarding the need to celebrate successes and recognize the special work by the Council's staff. We consulted on the best methods in order to do this at the Corporate Management Team meetings, the Assistant Heads' Forum and in the October 2024 series of the Managers and Team Leaders Network.

The overwhelming majority within each of these groups were in favour of introducing less formal arrangements than what had been done in the past and visits to individual teams, by the Leader and the Chief Executive for example, in order to congratulate individuals and recognize successes. This arrangement will be trialled during the coming year while short videos relating to some of the successes of our services are already being displayed before the full Council meetings in order to raise the awareness of the Elected Members.



## CONCLUSIONS

The content of the report demonstrates that the culture and “way of working” is moving in the right direction, with a number of examples where departments are taking proactive steps to promote the objectives of the Organisation Development Plan

However, progress and efforts to embed the culture remain mixed, and there are variations to be seen within individual departments as well as the Council as a whole.

The role of technology, and artificial intelligence in particular, is key if we are to succeed in implementing systems and processes that enable us to achieve the goal of putting “the people of Gwynedd at the centre of everything we do” and thereby providing the services it deserves in the current challenging financial climate.

The need to extend basic training on the “way of working” and to embed the practice of continuous evaluation is noted, as well as to facilitate the existing contact with field officers. The need to implement the objectives of the new Well-being Strategy, aimed at reducing existing levels of absences has to be a particular focus in the year ahead while encouraging ownership of performance among all Council staff is an issue that we as an organisation have not yet been able to address.

The success of the various talent development schemes is something to be proud of and an important contribution to the future of the Council's services but the slippage in the implementation of two streams within the work programme relating to identifying a progression to key posts and carrying out a review of arrangements to attract staff for the Council's workforce are matters of concern and require a significant investment of time in the year ahead.

There is a vision here that, if realised, will ensure the continuity of quality services. Much of the work to lay the foundations needed to achieve this has been, or is being, addressed and therefore the main challenge, above all else, during the remainder of the term of this Plan, is to multiply and accelerate efforts to deliver work arrangements as effectively and efficiently as possible within all Service units within the Council.



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