

Panel Performance Assessment Report
Cyngor Gwynedd: March 2026

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 In accordance with the performance duties under the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021, Cyngor Gwynedd commissioned a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

1.2 The onsite assessment was completed over a four-day period concluding on 13 March 2026 with a feedback presentation provided to the Council outlining the key recommendations detailed within this report.

1.3 The assessment was undertaken based on the Council's agreed scoping document and the WLGA's PPA methodology, which was developed with the sector.

1.4 In accordance with the statutory guidance the PPA is not an audit or an inspection and does not seek to duplicate work undertaken by regulators and other bodies. Whilst the panel has undertaken a corporate assessment, this assessment should be considered alongside other sources of assurance such as the Council's own self-assessment, internal audit reviews, external audits and regulatory reviews.

1.5 To ensure the PPA addressed the issues most important to the organisation, the Council produced a scoping document that outlined a number of additional areas for the panel's consideration. These agreed areas of focus are outlined in paragraph 4.2.

1.6 This report provides a summary overview of the conclusions of the panel reported by exception.

1.7 As part of its preparatory work, the panel considered the publicly available findings and ongoing work relating to the independent Child Practice Review being undertaken in Cyngor Gwynedd, as part of the panel's pre-reading to ensure appropriate contextual awareness. However, recognising that the Council has established a separate and specialist panel to examine this matter in detail, the PPA panel was careful not to duplicate or stray into the remit, scope, or lines of enquiry of that work. Instead, the panel focused solely on the Council's broader corporate governance, performance, and organisational arrangements, ensuring clear distinction between the statutory PPA and the work of the Child Practice Review.

Executive Summary

2.0 Overall Conclusion

2.1 Overall, despite operating within a challenging economic and fiscal environment shared by councils across Wales, the panel found that Cyngor Gwynedd is fulfilling its performance duties under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Council demonstrates generally sound governance arrangements, constructive and respectful member–officer relationships, and a clear commitment to continuous improvement. Alongside these strengths, the panel identified areas where further development would enhance the Council's ability to deliver its priorities effectively and sustainably over the medium to long term. Taken together, the panel's findings highlight a number of interconnected themes relating to the Council's financial sustainability, organisational capacity, performance and risk management, and approach to transformation.

2.2 The panel noted the evident pride in Gwynedd shared by staff, elected members and local partners, alongside a strong collective determination to work together for the benefit of the county. This sense of place and shared purpose was consistently reflected in discussions across services and sectors, with stakeholders emphasising the Council's deep roots in its communities and its commitment to protecting and promoting Gwynedd's cultural and social identity.

2.3 Partners at both local and regional level expressed respect for the Council's leadership and its collaborative approach, recognising Cyngor Gwynedd as a constructive, reliable and trusted presence within regional structures. Many highlighted the Council's willingness to engage openly, share intelligence, work jointly on complex issues and, where appropriate, take a leading role on behalf of the sector and the region, including its contribution to the establishment and ongoing support of the Corporate Joint Committee. There was clear enthusiasm among partners to build on these relationships as challenges and opportunities continue to evolve.

2.4 However, the Council continues to face tightening financial pressures and persistent workforce challenges, reinforcing the importance of accelerating its organisational transformation efforts. By building on the progress already made and approaching this work with renewed momentum, the Council will be better positioned to strengthen its resilience, adapt confidently to fiscal constraints, and take forward emerging opportunities for long-term, sustainable growth.

2.5 As the Council begins to look ahead to the next iteration of its Corporate Plan, it will be important to consider transformation, workforce planning, and financial sustainability as interconnected priorities. Taking a holistic approach will help ensure that the organisation's future operating model is coherent, achievable, and aligned with the strategic direction the Council wishes to set for the coming years.

2.6 While Cyngor Gwynedd has established a range of performance and risk management arrangements, these are not yet operating as a fully unified corporate framework. Variations in departmental practice, the absence of a clearly articulated corporate risk strategy and defined risk appetite, and inconsistent links between

performance, risk and the delivery of the Corporate Plan limit the Council's ability to gain a coherent, organisation-wide view of delivery and emerging pressures, and to clearly demonstrate how these issues are being addressed at a corporate level.

2.7 The panel identified a number of positive developments, including structured performance challenge arrangements, improved reporting to Cabinet, and recent steps to strengthen the role of scrutiny in performance management, all of which were broadly welcomed by those who engaged with the panel. Addressing the remaining gaps by further unifying performance management arrangements and strengthening the Council's corporate approach to risk would enhance governance and support more informed decision-making.

2.8 The strong alignment between corporate and political leadership is underpinned by constructive and professional collaboration between the Cabinet and senior officers, providing a solid foundation for coherent decision-making and consistent delivery. This relationship is an asset to the organisation, supporting a shared sense of purpose across leadership tiers. As these close working relationships continue, it will be important that they continue to be supported by clear arrangements for transparency, appropriate professional distance and robust scrutiny, including feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how challenge and stakeholder engagement have informed decisions, so that the current constructive challenge remains visible and present governance standards are maintained.

3.0 Panel

3.1 The following peers were commissioned by the WLGA to undertake the assessment. Selection of the peers was agreed and at the discretion of the Council, based on suitability of skills and experience:

- Independent Chair: Emlyn Dole (Former Council Leader: Carmarthenshire County Council)
- Senior Member Peer: Gwyneth Ellis (Denbighshire County Council)
- Senior Officer Peer: Rob Thomas, (Chief Executive, Vale of Glamorgan County Council)
- Wider Public, Private, or Voluntary Sector Peer: Siân-Elin Flint-Freel (Consultant)

3.2 The panel were supported by Joseph Lewis (Senior Policy Officer: Improvement), and Sarah Evans (Senior Support Officer: Improvement).

4.0 Scope and Approach

4.1 The panel were required to assess the extent to which the Council:

- Is exercising its functions effectively;
- Is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and
- Has effective governance in place for securing the above.

4.2 The Council identified the following questions for the panel to consider as part of the assessment:

Leadership and Governance: To what extent is the political leadership and at the level of senior officers setting a clear direction and driving change, and are the governance structures and decision-making processes robust enough to ensure better long-term outcomes for residents?

Strategic Planning, Resources and Capacity: Do we have the capacity and ability to deliver on our strategic priorities, and are the available resources effectively aligned with those priorities?

Monitoring, Measuring and Evaluating Performance: Do we have suitable arrangements in place to monitor and assess the performance of the services provided to customers and residents, to ensure continuous improvement?

4.3 In undertaking the assessment the panel conducted a desktop review of the Council's documents, data, external reports and other relevant intelligence. The onsite stage of the review involved a series of individual meetings and focus groups with the following stakeholders:

- Council Leader and Cabinet
- Chief Executive Officer, Corporate Directors, Monitoring Officer and S151 Officer
- Heads of Department and Key Officers of the Council
- Opposition Members
- Non-Executive Members

- Staff Representatives
- Trade Unions
- Business Forum
- Regional CEOs
- Chair/Vice Chair: Governance & Audit Committee
- Chair/Vice Chair: Scrutiny Committees
- Third Sector Representatives
- Residents
- Town and Community Council representatives
- Representatives of the Youth Council
- Representatives from the council's Arm's Length partners

5.0 Political Organisation

5.1 At the time of the Panel Performance Assessment, the makeup of the Cabinet was as follows:

Group Name	Number
Plaid Cymru	45
Independent	21
Gwynedd First	2
Individual Member	1
Total	**69**

5.2 At the time of the Panel Performance Assessment, the makeup of the Council's Cabinet was as follows:

Portfolio	Councillor	Political Affiliation
Council Leader	Nia Jeffreys	Plaid Cymru
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families	Menna Trenholme	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Legal and the Welsh Language	Llio Elenid Owen	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Education	Dewi Jones	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Finance	Huw Wyn Jones	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Environment	Craig ab Iago	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing	Dilwyn Morgan	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Highways, Engineering and Ymgynghoriaeth Gwynedd Consultancy	June Jones	Plaid Cymru

Cabinet Member for Housing and Property	Paul Rowlinson	Plaid Cymru
Cabinet Member for Economy and Community	Medwyn Hughes	Plaid Cymru

5.3 Cyngor Gwynedd has the following Scrutiny Committees:

- Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
- Communities Scrutiny Committee
- Care Scrutiny Committee

6.0 Corporate Organisation

6.1 Cyngor Gwynedd presented the panel with an initial scoping document setting out its corporate structure. This document explained that the Corporate Management Team constitutes the Council's most senior tier of management. Comprising of the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors, Heads of Department and the Monitoring Officer, the team is responsible for delivering the Council's strategic priorities and ensuring robust governance across the organisation.

6.2 Dafydd Gibbard is the Council's Chief Executive. He was appointed to his post in May 2021. The role of the Chief Executive includes:

- Leadership: Working with the Council's elected members to ensure strong and visible leadership and direction. Encouraging and enabling managers to motivate and inspire their staff to achieve objectives agreed by the Council.

- Strategic direction: Realising the strategic priorities set by the Council's Elected Members and stakeholders, by ensuring that staff understand these and follow them.

- Policy advice: Acting as the principal policy adviser to Elected Members of the Council.

- Partnerships: Leading and developing strong partnerships with other public services, businesses and voluntary groups across Gwynedd and beyond to improve the quality of life in the county.

- Governance: Overseeing and coordinating financial and performance management, risk management, and managing change within the Council.

6.3 The Chief Executive leads on strategic direction, operational effectiveness and policy advice to elected members, as well as on performance challenge arrangements in the following departments and fields:

- Education
- Economy and Community

- Digital Plan
- Corporate Services
- Legal Service
- Prioritising Resources
- Governance Arrangements
- Emergency Planning
- Corporate Joint Committee
- Workforce Culture

7.0 National and Local Challenges

7.1 Cyngor Gwynedd continues to operate within a challenging national and local context that provides important background to the panel's findings on performance, governance and value for money. Like many rural authorities in Wales, the Council faces a combination of demographic change, rising demand for services, and sustained financial pressure, all of which shape its operating environment and influence the choices available to the organisation.

7.2 Demographic trends present particular challenges for the county. Gwynedd has an ageing population, with projections showing a significant increase in residents aged 65 and over in the next decades, alongside population decline and a reduction in younger working-age cohorts. These trends are already impacting the demand for services, particularly in social care, health-related provision and housing, while also placing pressure on the Council's ability to recruit and retain a sustainable workforce.

7.3 These demographic pressures are closely linked to the Council's current financial position. The panel noted that while Cyngor Gwynedd has continued to set balanced budgets, this has been achieved against a backdrop of recurring overspends in several demand-led services, most notably Adults' and Children's Social Services, Waste and Emergency Accommodation. In recent years, departmental overspends have been mitigated through corporate underspends and one-off measures, supported on occasion by late in-year funding, allowing overall outturn positions to be broadly balanced. The Council has also delivered a total of £47m in efficiency savings and service adaptations since 2015.

7.4 Looking ahead, the Medium-Term Financial Plan highlights the scale of the challenge facing the Council. Despite a strong cumulative record of savings delivery, the plan identifies significant projected funding gaps over the next three years, reflecting ongoing demand growth, inflationary pressures and constrained funding assumptions. Although the Council holds relatively healthy levels of reserves, reliance on reserves and one-off solutions to mitigate structural pressures highlights the need to strengthen longer-term financial sustainability.

7.5 Taken together, these factors illustrate a demanding and uncertain operating context. Persistent demand growth, particularly in statutory services, coupled with financial constraints, increases the importance of clear prioritisation, effective risk management and robust performance oversight. This context underscores the scale of the challenge facing the Council as it seeks to deliver its Corporate Plan ambitions and maintain service resilience over the medium to long term.

8.0 Strengths and Areas of Innovation

8.1 While the fiscal and demographic challenges outlined in Section 7 remain significant, the panel also recognised positive and forward-looking responses across the Council, particularly in workforce planning, service innovation and long-term sustainability. The panel heard evidence of practical efforts to strengthen organisational resilience and respond to future pressures. Cynllun Yfory and Llechen Lân are examples of this broader approach, illustrating how the Council is both developing local professional capacity and using evidence-based planning to consider the future sustainability of key services.

Case Study:

Cynllun Yfory

Cynllun Yfory, the Council's apprenticeship scheme, represents a clear strength in Gwynedd's approach to workforce planning. The scheme is directly aligned to the Council's most pressing workforce challenges and provides a structured pathway for young people to develop professional skills while remaining in the county. It offers targeted opportunities in key professions such as Civil Engineering, Planning, Ecology, Environmental Health and Health and Safety, supporting the Council to build a sustainable talent pipeline in areas where recruitment across the sector has become increasingly difficult. The scheme reflects recognised best practice in developing future professional capacity and demonstrates a proactive, place-based commitment to nurturing local talent.

Llechen Lân

Llechen Lân (A Clean Slate) provides a clear, evidence-based approach to understanding and planning for the future sustainability of older people's social care in Gwynedd. It brings together demographic, workforce and financial modelling to forecast demand over the next 10–20 years, compares Gwynedd's current patterns of provision with other rural councils, and sets out practical levers to reduce pressure on traditional services. The work highlights the role of prevention and innovation, including strengthening community and strengths-based approaches, expanding technology-enabled care and direct payments, and increasing suitable accommodation options such as extra care housing, supported by clearer long-term planning, commissioning and workforce development.

It also highlights how the council is already using AI to support the council's delivery of its social care ambitions, and provides recommendations as to how this can be progressed further.

Overview of Findings

9.0 Performance Requirement: Is exercising its functions effectively

9.1 The panel's review of the regulatory reports from the past two years, and interviews onsite, concluded that there was evidence that the Council is exercising its functions effectively.

9.2 Cyngor Gwynedd has a Corporate Plan which sets out the Council's vision and priorities until 2028, aligning its work with the Well-being Goals, Ways of Working and Sustainability Principle of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. It organises the Council's ambitions into seven priority areas, each supported by targeted projects aimed at improving outcomes for residents and strengthening long-term well-being. The plan reflects the county's distinct Welsh-speaking communities and recognises the need for place-based responses.

9.3 The panel engaged with several of Cyngor Gwynedd's key strategic partners, including Mantell Gwynedd, Coleg Menai, the North Wales Ambition Board / Uchelgais Gogledd Cymru (the Corporate Joint Committee), and the Chief Executives of Ynys Môn and Wrexham councils. These discussions highlighted the maturity of the Council's partnerships and the strength of the forums that support them. Partners reaffirmed their shared commitment to collaborative working and to ensuring that local priorities are addressed in a coordinated and effective manner. In many cases, partners also commented on the Council's enthusiasm and willingness to step forward, convene others and take a leading role where this adds value. These conversations underscored Cyngor Gwynedd's strategic contribution to the development of regional forums across both North-West Wales and the wider North Wales region, particularly when these forums were in a more formative stage.

9.4 The panel observed that the Council's corporate values, most clearly articulated through *Ffordd Gwynedd* as its core organisational ethos, were well understood across the authority and evident in the behaviours of staff at all levels, including operational managers and frontline teams. The panel also identified a number of specific outcomes delivered through *Ffordd Gwynedd* as having made a positive contribution to how the Council is meeting the performance duties considered by the panel, including initiatives such as the establishment of the Managers and Team Leaders' Network, the extension of apprenticeship and trainee schemes and establishing the Care Acadamy.

9.5 However, the panel also heard that *Ffordd Gwynedd* has lost some of its original clarity and impact. While staff at all levels recognised the strong name recognition of *Ffordd Gwynedd* and the positive intentions that underpin it, many felt that its purpose has become less clearly defined. The panel heard concerns that elements of "mission creep" have emerged, with *Ffordd Gwynedd* increasingly perceived as an additional internal strategy rather than a unifying way of working. In this context, some staff described a sense that it now sits alongside, and at times competes with, other key organisational strategies, such as the workforce development and transformation plans, rather than providing a clear cultural framework that consistently shapes delivery across the organisation.

9.6 The panel's assessment indicates good alignment between the senior executive officer team and the Council's political leadership. This alignment is evident in their shared commitment to the Council's priorities and a common understanding of the fiscal and demographic challenges it faces. Discussions with political leaders indicated that they are well supported by officers, while also retaining the space and confidence to provide clear political direction to officers.

9.7 The panel recognised that Cyngor Gwynedd's workforce planning emphasises developing a long-term employment pipeline through its apprenticeship, trainee and professional development programmes. These pathways help young people enter specialist public service roles, such as planning, environmental health, engineering, social care and regulatory services, at a time when the authority risks losing significant expertise as experienced staff retire. By investing in structured training routes, the Council supports local talent, addresses skills shortages and strengthens organisational resilience, ensuring it has the technical capacity required to meet current and future statutory responsibilities.

9.8 As the Council prepares for the next iteration of its Corporate Plan, there is an opportunity to build on the strengths of the current theme-based approach and develop a clearer, longer-term vision for Gwynedd and its communities. A more strategic focus on the Council's highest priorities, shaped and supported by meaningful involvement of staff, elected members, local residents and other council partners, would help ensure that the Corporate Plan reflects both the needs and aspirations of Gwynedd as a place. Aligning this work fully with the Medium-Term Financial Plan and the Council's Transformation Strategy will provide a coherent framework that links resources, strategic direction and outcomes, enabling the organisation to plan confidently for the future.

9.9 **Recommendations**

1a	Cyngor Gwynedd should build on the current theme-based approach when preparing and developing the next Corporate Plan with a focus on: • planning for the long-term; • articulating a vision for Gwynedd and the values which are fundamental to its delivery; • ensuring an approach which focusses on the key strategic priorities for the Council and Gwynedd as a place; • involving staff, elected members and the wider community to develop and deliver a place-based Corporate Plan; and • ensuring it is fully aligned to the Medium-Term Financial Plan and the Council's Transformation Strategy

10.0 Performance Requirement: The extent to which the Council is using its resources economically, efficiently, and effectively

10.1 Overall, the panel found that Cyngor Gwynedd is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively within a challenging financial and demographic context. However, the scale and persistence of pressures identified in the Medium-Term Financial Plan, particularly recurring overspends in key demand-led services and increasing reliance on one-off measures—underline the need for a clearer and more unified approach to strategic planning and organisational transformation. While the Council benefits from committed leadership, a strong cumulative record of savings delivery and well-established partnerships, these strengths are not yet being leveraged consistently across the organisation. The panel considered that the Council would benefit from articulating a clear, whole-organisation transformation approach that brings together existing improvement activity into a single, coherent framework. Such an approach should recognise and maximise the value of external partners, ensuring that transformation activity draws on the insight and capacity of Gwynedd's public, private and voluntary sectors, and is embedded within and supported by the Medium-Term Financial Plan to strengthen long-term financial resilience.

10.2 This section also considers one of the Council's additional areas of focus agreed for the assessment, relating to Strategic Planning, Resources and Capacity. In doing so, the panel has examined not only whether Cyngor Gwynedd has the internal capacity and capability to deliver its strategic priorities, but also whether it is making effective use of the full range of resources available to it. The panel noted that the Council cannot deliver on its ambitions in isolation and that resources should be understood more broadly than financial capacity alone, encompassing the contribution of partners across the public, private and third sectors. This section therefore explores the extent to which the Council recognises and mobilises these external partnerships as an integral part of delivering its priorities and responding to the scale of financial, demographic and service pressures it faces.

Financial Resources section

10.3 Cyngor Gwynedd's MTFP runs for three years and is recognised by the Council as a 'live' document. While the associated annual budget is refreshed each year and is supported by a detailed income and expenditure plan, the medium-term element of the MTFP remains a high-level assessment of the Council's financial position over a three-year period. This forward look is updated as new information becomes available, including changes to national and local funding assumptions, income projections, service pressures and savings plans.

10.4 The Council's medium-term financial outlook remains challenging, with the Medium-Term Financial Plan projecting a cumulative funding gap of £40m across 2026/27–2028/29 in the absence of further intervention. Although the 2026/27 budget has been balanced through a combination of Council Tax increases (5.32%), local service bids and prudent corporate budgeting, financial resilience is increasingly reliant on reserves and one-off measures. Pressures within social care, Emergency Accommodation and persistent overspending in waste services remain

structural in nature and, in the panel's view, will require transformational service redesign rather than incremental adjustments. The Council has established a number of plans and strategies to respond to these pressures, including the Housing Operational Plan and the Waste Strategy, which set out measures to alleviate current overspends.

10.5 The panel noted that the Council has a strong track record of delivery on savings when viewed cumulatively, with the Council having achieved 93% (£43m) of planned savings since 2015. However, despite this positive track record, the panel noted that recurring overspends have continued to emerge across several service areas in recent years, reflecting the growing impact of demographic change—particularly an ageing population and rising levels of complex need—which is placing sustained pressure on demand-led services and making reliance on short-term mitigation increasingly unsustainable.

10.6 Cyngor Gwynedd has maintained short-term financial stability, but continues to face significant structural pressures that will require sustained organisational transformation and stronger long-term financial planning. In recent years, recurrent departmental overspends, particularly within Children's Services, Adults' Services, Waste and Emergency Accommodation, have become an established feature of the Council's financial position, with a £6.6m overspend in 2024/25 mitigated only through exceptional corporate underspends and late Welsh Government grants. While the Council's cumulative savings delivery remains strong, with 93% of planned savings realised since 2015, service-level pressures continue to intensify, reflecting ongoing demand growth and inflation rather than short-term or one-off factors.

Transformation section

10.7 The panel recognised that both corporate and political leadership acknowledge the need for organisational transformation as a critical component of achieving long-term sustainability.

10.8 While the Corporate Plan includes a wide range of change-focused projects across its seven priority areas, most notably within *An Efficient Gwynedd*, the panel found that these initiatives are largely presented as individual service or thematic actions rather than as part of a single, coherent transformation programme. Evidence from the Council's 2025–26 Performance and Spending Report demonstrates that significant improvement activity is underway, including digital developments, efficiency measures, workforce initiatives and service redesign, supported by established performance and scrutiny arrangements. However, this activity is predominantly described and assessed on a project-by-project basis and would benefit from greater articulation of how individual initiatives collectively contribute to a shared transformation ambition or to addressing longer-term financial and organisational sustainability.

10.9 As a result, the panel concluded that the Council's current transformation ambitions appear fragmented, with change activity focused on delivering discrete projects rather than being framed within a coherent, whole-organisation programme of change. This limits the Council's ability to clearly demonstrate how improvement

activity is prioritised, sequenced and targeted in response to ongoing fiscal, demographic and operational pressures. The panel considered that establishing a more integrated and overarching transformation framework would help to clarify the Council's long-term intent, strengthen alignment across services, and provide clearer visibility of how individual projects contribute to a shared direction of travel. Crucially, such an approach should be fully aligned with the Medium-Term Financial Plan, ensuring that transformation activity is directly informed by the scale of the financial challenge and supported by a realistic assessment of the resources required to deliver sustainable change.

10.10 The panel felt the Council had a clear opportunity to make more effective use of *Ffordd Gwynedd* in shaping its future transformation priorities. While the ethos remains a valued and well-recognised part of the organisation's identity, the panel was less clear about how *Ffordd Gwynedd* currently contributes to the Council's forward-looking vision, noting that its strategic purpose has become less clearly defined over time.

10.11 Repositioning *Ffordd Gwynedd* within a refreshed, organisation-wide transformation framework would strengthen its relevance and enable it to act as a practical cultural anchor for change. Doing so would reinforce expectations around leadership behaviours, decision-making and service design, and ensure that the Council's cultural model is fully integrated with its long-term financial, workforce and operational challenges. This alignment would also support a more consistent application of the ethos across departments, enabling *Ffordd Gwynedd* to act as a unifying driver of the Council's future direction rather than a concept referenced unevenly across the organisation.

Staff

10.12 During the onsite assessment, the panel met with a range of staff from across the organisation. Staff expressed positive views about working for the Council, highlighting the advantages of being part of a Welsh-speaking authority, the strong work–life balance culture, and the generally open and accessible approach of the leadership team.

10.13 Staff highlighted the Managers and Team Leaders Network as a valuable forum for staff engagement. It provides an effective platform for sharing organisational insight, strengthening communication, and supporting consistent understanding of corporate priorities across departments.

Senior Leadership

10.14 The panel noted that the Chief Executive holds a wide strategic portfolio—this is outlined in 6.1 – 6.4, covering areas such as Education, Economy and Community, Digital, Corporate Services, Legal Services, governance, emergency planning, and workforce culture. While this reflects strong personal leadership, the scale of responsibility is substantial for one role. The panel considers that the Council now needs to strengthen and expand its senior strategic capacity to ensure the organisation can manage its modernisation ambitions, respond effectively to emerging pressures, and maintain resilience at the highest level.

10.15 The panel's overall conclusion is that Cyngor Gwynedd's senior leadership capacity is extremely lean given the scope and complexity of the organisation. The breadth of responsibilities and reporting lines to the Chief Executive, alongside the demands of large-scale transformation and change management, competing service pressures, sustainable financial management, risk management, workforce challenges, and the need to maintain delivery and performance, means that strategic leadership capacity is insufficient in terms of both coverage and distribution. This increases the risk of over-reliance on key individuals, reduces organisational capacity to progress cross-cutting priorities, and constrains the pace and consistency with which transformation can be planned, governed and delivered

1b	Cyngor Gwynedd should review the capacity of its strategic leadership to enable it to deliver on its key priorities and plan for the long term/future.
2a	Ensure that work on future strategic planning and transformation has the workforce at its core, bringing together the various strands of practise that already exists within the Cyngor to ensure a whole Council approach to involvement and internal engagement.

Partnerships

10.16 The panel noted that Cyngor Gwynedd recognises the importance of mobilising the collective resources of its partners to achieve its objectives. The panel highlighted the Council's strong and well-established relationship with the third sector through Mantell Gwynedd, alongside the ongoing renewal of the formal Compact Agreement with the sector.

10.17 The panel noted that this partnership has drawn down £24.4 million in UKSPF funding since 2021. The panel noted that Mantell Gwynedd has suggested that its Social Return on Investment (SROI) for every £1 of funding received is between £1.85 - £3.36 on specific projects.

10.18 While these partnerships represent a clear organisational strength, the panel emphasised the need to connect this collaborative potential more explicitly to the significant financial and operational challenges outlined within the Medium-Term Financial Plan. The panel considered that deeper alignment between partnership working, service redesign, and the Council's long-term financial planning would help

"To achieve the objectives of Gwynedd Council's Corporate Plan, effective collaboration and efficient use of local resources are essential. By working with the third sector, Gwynedd Council aims to ensure local benefit and value for money, while leveraging the added value that third sector organisations offer."

Compact Agreement (Draft) Cyngor Gwynedd and The Third Sector

ensure that the collective capacity of local partners is fully leveraged to meet these structural pressures and support a more sustainable future operating model.

10.19 However, the panel also observed that this level of strategic focus is not applied uniformly across all sectors; while partnership working with the voluntary sector is more developed and supported by clear structures, engagement with the business community appears less mature and is still evolving in terms of its coherence and strategic intent.

Business Community

10.20 The panel noted that the Council has a range of mechanisms in place to engage with businesses, and that these arrangements have evolved over time. The Council has also recently deployed additional resources to strengthen engagement with the sector, including a dedicated Engagement Officer, a Business Bulletin and an Annual Survey. While these developments are positive, the panel considered that the overall approach remains at a relatively early stage and is not yet as coherent or strategically developed as equivalent arrangements with the Council's other partners.

10.21 The panel heard from representatives of the local business community that, although relationships with the Council are improving, current engagement arrangements are still often experienced as informal and operational in focus. Some interviewees perceived there to be no clear or formal mechanism through which the wider business community could feed into Council decision-making or raise emerging concerns, suggesting there is more to do to strengthen the visibility, structure and reach of existing arrangements. At the time of the assessment, the Council did not operate a standing business forum; instead, officers convened an ad hoc group for the purposes of the assessment, comprising largely organisations already connected to the authority.

10.22 In this context, the panel welcomed the Council's commitment within its draft Gwynedd Economic Strategy, to establish a formal Gwynedd Economy Forum. A more systematic and inclusive approach would strengthen the Council's understanding of local economic needs, support evidence-based strategic planning, and reinforce its role as a place-based economic leader.

10.23 More broadly, the panel considered these issues to be closely connected to the Council's wider question about capacity and resources. Delivering the Council's strategic ambitions will require a more expansive understanding of the full range of resources available across the Council, recognising that local partners will be vital to achieving sustained change. The constructive and well-established relationships developed with the third sector provide a strong foundation for this work, offering a model that could be extended to other sectors and applied more widely across North Wales.

10.24 Interviewees also emphasised the need for a more proactive and outward-facing approach to promoting Gwynedd as a destination for investment. While the county benefits from strong national brand recognition, the Council's limited presence at major trade events and economic forums was seen as a missed opportunity to

position Gwynedd as a competitive location for new enterprise. Some businesses expressed uncertainty about the Council's wider approach to inward investment, including leadership responsibilities and engagement processes.

Arm's Length Companies

10.25 The panel observed strong and constructive relationships between the Council and *Byw'n Iach*, the arm's-length company responsible for delivering leisure services on behalf of the authority. Representatives from *Byw'n Iach* demonstrated a clear understanding of the Council's strategic aspirations and how Byw'n Iach's work aligns with those priorities. The Board was regarded as functioning effectively, with ongoing collaborative projects, reflecting a shared commitment to expanding the organisation's focus on wider wellness and wellbeing alongside traditional leisure provision.

10.26 However, the panel noted concerns regarding the financial sustainability of *Byw'n Iach*. The company does not currently operate on a break-even basis and continues to rely on supplementary financial support from the Council. This position has contributed to frustration within the organisation about limited resources and the constraints this places on its ability to deliver and grow its wellbeing offer. The panel considered that the Council should address these issues as part of its broader commitment to service transformation and the development of a financially sustainable future operating model.

Trade Unions

10.27 As part of the onsite assessment, the panel extended an invitation to all Trade Unions recognised by the Council to engage in discussions as part of the review. The feedback received reflected a generally positive and constructive working relationship with the Council, with Trade Union representatives describing an improving environment for open dialogue and engagement. In particular, the panel heard positive feedback about a recent meeting convened by the Chief Executive with Trade Union colleagues, which was welcomed as an opportunity for open and honest discussion, enabling issues to be explored constructively and in a spirit of transparency.

10.28 Trade Union feedback characterised the relationship with the Council as professional and constructive, noting that progress has been made in recent years to strengthen involvement and improve mutual understanding. The panel was provided with examples where steps have been taken to involve Trade Unions earlier in policy development, including in relation to the Drug and Alcohol Policy, which was viewed as a positive move towards more meaningful consultation.

10.29 Notwithstanding these improvements, the panel was advised that there remains scope to strengthen communication, particularly during periods of organisational change and restructuring. Feedback highlighted the importance of clearer and more consistent communication about the reasons for change, how views expressed through consultation influence decision-making, and the timing of key stages within

restructuring processes. Addressing these areas would help consolidate progress made to date and further embed the principles of effective social partnership across the organisation.

Residents

10.30 While on site, the panel met with local residents in a forum organised by the Council. The forum comprised members of the Council's Residents Panel, all of whom had received an invited to attend.

10.31 Residents described generally positive experiences of council services, particularly in relation to statutory frontline provision, which was widely regarded as responsive and effective. This was seen by the panel as an important strength, given the challenging operating context. Alongside this, residents expressed some uncertainty about the Council's overall direction, communication practices and the consistency with which its stated values are reflected across the organisation.

10.32 Several residents felt that the Council's strategic direction was not clearly communicated and described engagement and consultation processes as largely one-sided, with limited feedback on how their input influences decisions. Views on specific policy areas were mixed, with some questioning how consistently stated ambitions, such as Welsh language promotion, are reflected in wider policy and planning. Overall, residents expressed a desire for clearer communication, greater transparency around priorities, and more meaningful opportunities to influence local decision-making.

2b	Cyngor Gwynedd should set out a unified transformation approach that clearly articulates the organisation's overarching direction and priorities for change. This approach should: • operate at a strategic, whole-organisation level; • utilise the value of partners; • be integrated with, and funded through, the Medium-Term Financial Plan; and • provide a firm basis for safeguarding the organisation's long-term financial resilience.

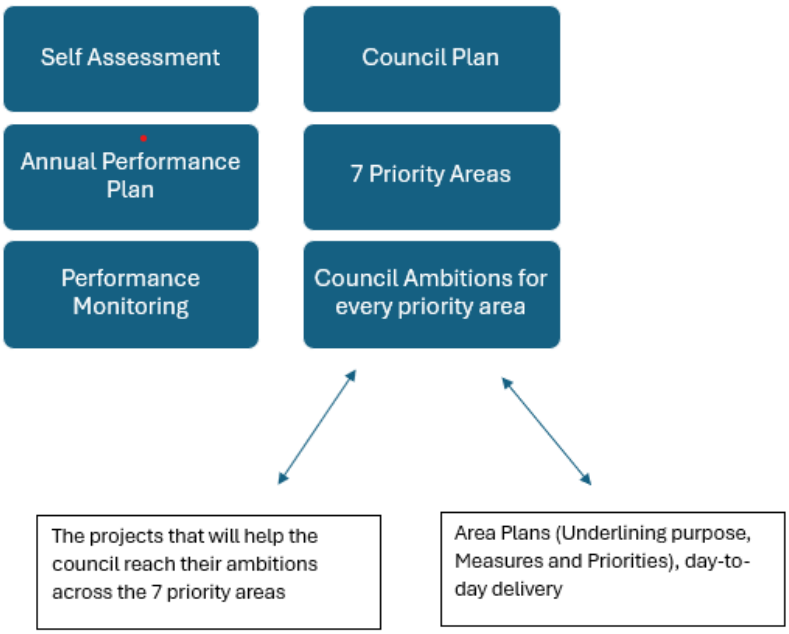
3	In order to build capacity and strengthen partnership working: • Bring adopted economic strategy to life at all levels throughout Gwynedd; • Realise the potential of partnership working with town and community councils; • Enhance the Council's capacity to deliver on its economic/social ambitions; and • Ensure that the Mantell Gwynedd Compact is fully implemented and monitored.

11.0 Performance Requirement: Has effective governance in place

11.1 Overall, the panel concluded that the Council has effective governance arrangements in place, with some identified areas for improvement relating to clarity of alignment of performance and risk management with the Council's key strategic objectives, risk appetite, and transformation priorities over the short, medium and long term.

11.2 The Council has a constitution and a scheme of delegation, which clearly outlines decision-making responsibilities. The Council also regularly evaluates its own performance against a framework of self-evaluation.

11.3 The Council provided the Panel with an overview of its governance structures, illustrated in the diagram below. The diagram sets out how the Council's self-assessment process, Council Plan, and annual performance reviews connect with the seven priority areas in the Corporate Plan. It also shows how these elements link to the Council's performance monitoring and challenge arrangements, and how they collectively support the delivery of priorities within each area.



11.4 The panel reviewed the Council's self-assessments and noted that they provide a broad, narrative overview of performance. The Annual Performance Report sets out the Council's intention to present a balanced picture of performance, highlighting both areas of success and those requiring further attention. While the panel recognised the value of this narrative approach, it also observed that the self-assessment places greater emphasis on descriptive and thematic commentary than on evaluative analysis, quantitative measures or clearly articulated assessments of impact.

11.5 While the self-assessment therefore meets statutory requirements, the panel considered that its value as an assurance tool would be strengthened through increased use of measurable data, clearer evaluative commentary and more explicit

conclusions. The introduction of a consistent RAG status across priorities and service areas would further enhance clarity, enabling performance trends, risks and areas requiring attention to be presented in a more transparent and accessible way.

Performance and Risk Management

11.6 The panel recognised that Cyngor Gwynedd has taken positive steps to strengthen its performance and risk management arrangements, supported by structured bi-monthly departmental meetings that consider progress against Council projects, day-to-day service performance, and the Council's Corporate Risk Register. Outputs from this process inform the regular performance reports submitted by Cabinet Members during the year, alongside the Annual Performance Report.

11.7 While the panel heard that most departments follow a broadly consistent approach to performance reporting, typically producing an overall dashboard supported by graphs and narrative, this approach is not yet applied consistently across the organisation. Variation remains in a small number of departments, particularly in the systems and methods used to compile and present performance information, resulting in differing levels of analysis, reporting and challenge. Taken together, these inconsistencies limit the Council's ability to gain a coherent, organisation-wide view of delivery, performance pressures and emerging risks.

11.8 Sector-led guidance highlights that a coherent, organisation-wide risk and performance framework, supported by clear accountability, consistent processes and a strong risk-aware culture, enables councils to make better-informed decisions, respond effectively to uncertainty and maintain focus on long-term priorities. Given the scale and complexity of the ambitions set out in the Corporate Plan, the panel considers that unifying performance management and strengthening corporate risk arrangements represent important areas for improvement.

11.9 The panel also noted efforts to enhance the role of scrutiny in performance management through the introduction of performance challenge opportunities from April 2025 onwards. Although this process along with broader changes to scrutiny is still embedding, this development was broadly welcomed by those who engaged with the panel.

11.10 The panel found that the Council benefits from constructive and professional working relationships between members and officers, supported by established scrutiny and governance arrangements. To maximise the effectiveness of these arrangements, the panel considers it important that scrutiny committees and other performance challenge mechanisms are used consistently and effectively, with clear feedback on how scrutiny challenge, recommendations and stakeholder engagement have informed decisions. This would help retain and reinforce confidence in governance processes and strengthen the visibility of constructive scrutiny across the organisation.

11.11 The panel noted that Cyngor Gwynedd's approach to scrutiny has evolved in response to recommendations from Audit Wales, including the strengthening of links

between Scrutiny's Forward Work Programme and the Council's Corporate Plan. Interviewees reported that, while the revised scrutiny arrangements are still embedding, they are contributing to improvements in scrutiny performance. However, some interviewees expressed a preference for the previous arrangements, underlining the importance of the Council maintaining a continued focus on strengthening scrutiny effectiveness.

11.12 The panel met with the Council's Governance and Audit Committee and found that, while the committee operates within a fundamentally sound governance framework, a number of factors were constraining its overall effectiveness. Interviewees highlighted that the frequency and length of meetings, combined with overloaded agendas and lengthy papers, can limit the time available for focused consideration of high-risk and strategic issues.

11.13 While officer support and lay member contributions were constructive, the panel identified opportunities to strengthen induction, training and the more systematic use of lay member expertise, particularly in agenda planning, report development and the preparation of key governance documents such as the Annual Governance Statement.

11.14 While the Council has an established risk strategy, some lay members indicated that more consistent and timely information on high-level risks, including reputational risks, would further support their assurance role.

11.15 The panel also noted that the relative large size of the committee, when compared with sector norms, may be contributing to these challenges, affecting efficiency, increasing training demands on both lay and elected members, and placing additional pressure on agendas. Taken together, these issues suggest that, while governance arrangements are adequate, refinements to committee size, meeting structure, training arrangements and the integration of lay member expertise would enhance the committee's overall efficacy and strengthen governance assurance across the Council. Given the central role of the Governance and Audit Committee in the Council's overall governance framework, it is important that these arrangements continue to be reviewed and strengthened to ensure the committee remains effective in providing independent and rigorous assurance.

11.16 More broadly, the panel also heard comments about the scope and balance of scrutiny arrangements across the authority, including the challenge of scrutinising both education and economic matters within a single committee. Given the scale and statutory importance of the education portfolio, some felt this can limit the depth of scrutiny afforded to economic issues

11.17 The panel identified a common theme from committee chairs and vice chairs they engaged with, who reported that there is scope to strengthen their connection to the wider governance process, including receiving more consistent information between meetings. Interviewees also noted that longer gaps between committee cycles can, at times, delay feedback on issues raised, and that the use of draft rather than final reports can limit the clarity and effectiveness of scrutiny.

11.18 The panel noted that scrutiny development is supported through annual committee workshops to agree forward work programmes, including refresher training on the principles of effective scrutiny.

11.19 Members suggested that training has tended to focus on process and the principles of scrutiny, rather than practical tools and techniques to support effective questioning. The panel emphasised that both are essential for high-performing scrutiny committees.

11.20 In 2025/26, this offer was adapted to support the introduction of the new performance challenge arrangements, with two training sessions delivered in May 2025. However, the panel saw evidence that take-up among members is variable.

11.21 **Recommendations**

4	Cyngor Gwynedd needs to develop and agree a corporate risk strategy, which articulates the Council's risk appetite and: • ensures an up-to-date corporate risk register and strategy; • defines the role of leadership team, governance and audit committee, cabinet, and full council in regular oversight and monitoring of the strategy and register; and • considers training and development needs of members on oversight of council risk.
5	Cyngor Gwynedd should unify and refine its performance management arrangements with a particular focus on demonstrating contributions to: • the delivery of the Corporate Plan; • linking corporate and departmental risks; and • increasing peer challenge opportunities across and beyond the Council

12.0 Acknowledgements

12.1 The Panel and the WLGA would like to extend their thanks to the Council, its members and officers for the support in coordinating documentation requests, responses to queries, arranging meetings and workshops and providing responsive onsite support.

12.2 The Panel would also want to extend their thanks to the organisations, partners and interviewees they met with whilst on site.