

Springing Forward – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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Detailed report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

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

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

The table below shows some key facts and figures relating to the Council's building assets and workforce in 2020-21.

Number of Council buildings owned in 2020-21 ¹	323 ²
Value of property, as at 31 March 2021 ¹	£122.5m
Number of staff ³	2,852
Spending on workforce ⁴	£103m
Percentage of staff who are male/female ⁵	24%/76%
Percentage of staff who work part time/full time ⁵	49%/51%
Percentage of staff aged over 50 years ⁵	40%
Percentage of staff who left the Council ⁵	17%

¹ Source: Provided by the Council

² The Council's Asset Register for 2020-21 included 323 operational buildings, of which around 120 were individual business units. The register includes any asset that has been constructed on a piece of land which does not fall into another specific classification, such as infrastructure (roads).

³ Source: InfoBaseCymru

⁴ Source: 2020-21 Statement of Accounts (note 7.2)

⁵ Source: InfoBaseCymru

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

What we found

- 8 Our review sought to answer the question: Is the Council's strategic approach strengthening its ability to transform? In doing this work we have identified some of the direct impact of the pandemic as well as some operational and governance issues exacerbated by the pandemic.
- 9 Overall, we found that during the pandemic the Council made significant changes to its assets and the way that its workforce operates, but further work is needed for it to understand its future asset and workforce needs and to ensure that future Council decisions are appropriately informed by Equality Impact Assessments and the sustainable development principle.
- 10 We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council is actively reviewing its assets and looking to rationalise its office buildings, but in taking the decision to decommission and demolish the civic centre it did not complete an Equality Impact Assessment, as required by the Equality Act 2010, nor did it fully consider the sustainable development principle;
 - the Council has appropriate arrangements to manage its assets but its understanding of how changes to service delivery will impact on its long-term asset needs is limited;
 - senior managers and elected members receive regular information on specific asset-related projects, but the Council lacks a reporting mechanism for its Strategic Asset Management Plan;
 - the Council has implemented a flexible, agile working model but its workforce planning arrangements are underdeveloped;
 - the Council is supporting staff to adjust to agile working but does not yet fully understand its future workforce needs, although work is underway to develop service workforce plans; and
 - the Council is making arrangements to review its new operating model but does not yet have a clear set of criteria to assess progress against its Workforce Strategy.

Recommendations

Exhibit 2: recommendations

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

Recommendations	
Equality impact assessments	
R1	Ensure that all decisions are informed by a timely equality impact assessment where required.
Develop a longer-term asset strategy	
R2	<p>In developing its new strategic asset management strategy, the Council should apply the sustainable development principle and specifically ensure that it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• builds on learning from its experience of the COVID-19 pandemic;• takes account of longer-term trends that may affect service provision and the efficient use of assets;• aligns with other strategic documents, including decarbonisation, commercial, workforce and digital strategies;• sets out the Council's intended outcomes over the short, medium and longer term;• takes account of the needs of staff, service users and partners; and• sets out SMART performance measures and appropriate monitoring and reporting arrangements.

Recommendations

Further develop workforce strategy and planning

R3 In delivering its workforce strategy, the Council should ensure that it:

- incorporates learning from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- takes a sufficiently long-term view, for example, taking into account upcoming reviews of service delivery and longer-term trends which may affect workforce planning;
- provides service managers with the necessary skills and capacity to develop their workforce plans;
- collates service workforce plans to understand what actions it needs to take at a corporate level to strengthen its workforce;
- expands workforce information to include detail on:
 - i. current skills and current and future skills gaps;
 - ii. talent and succession planning; and
 - iii. critical posts and the risks associated with them becoming vacant;
- strengthens the underlying action plans by developing SMART objectives so progress can be monitored and scrutinised; and
- aligns with other strategic documents, including decarbonisation, commercial, asset management and digital strategies.

Engagement

R4 As part of the review of the new operating model, seek the views of residents on the community hubs to provide assurance around the Council's decision and to inform the future development of hubs.

R5 Consider how the Council might adapt its public engagement methods so it can continue to engage with the public in the event of future lockdowns or other restrictions.

R6 Work with local businesses to monitor and understand the impact of the closure of the Civic Centre and how the Council can support those businesses whilst the site remains vacant.

Resources

R7 Identify the costs of delivering the assets and workforce strategies and incorporate these into the medium-term financial strategy.

R8 Collaborate with public sector partners across Gwent to evaluate the potential benefits of developing a strategic long-term approach to a single public estate.

R9 Build on existing examples of collaborative working by developing a more systematic approach to collaboration.

Recommendations

Sustainable development principle

R10 The Council should seek to fully embed the sustainable development principle in its decision making.

Detailed report

Assets

The Council is actively reviewing its assets and looking to rationalise its office buildings. However, in taking the decision to decommission and demolish the civic centre it did not complete an Equality Impact Assessment as required by the Equality Act 2010, nor did it fully consider the sustainable development principle

11 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- in October 2020, full Council approved the decommissioning of the Civic Centre in Ebbw Vale – one of two main office buildings in use prior to the pandemic. The proposals included the development of a democratic hub at the General Offices in Ebbw Vale and the creation of community hubs where the public would access services previously located in the Civic Centre. Initially, this was based on proposals to buy the Festival Park site in Ebbw Vale and repurpose it for business, housing, and a replacement office for the Council and interested public sector partners. However, this option fell through, and in November 2020, Council agreed to leave the Festival Park site to interested private investors but to take forward the agreed plans for the Civic Centre, democratic hub and community hubs.
- then, in March 2021, Council considered and agreed a new operating model and approved the decommissioning of the Civic Centre. The new operating model, developed by a member working group along with officers and trade union representatives, is based on agile working and draws on the changes to working practices brought about by the pandemic.
- the Council's current Strategic Asset Management Plan 2017-2022 already included plans to review its long-term office requirements and establish the future of the Civic Centre. The pandemic accelerated this process, enforcing a different way of working which the Council took the opportunity to adapt and take forward into a long-term operating model rather than returning to previous ways of working.
- to support this new operating model, the Council classified all non-school-based job roles as either home, agile or service/community-based. Using the assumption that agile workers will be office-based for two to three days a week, it then calculated the amount of office space it would need to accommodate this new way of working. Based on these calculations, the Council assessed it had sufficient office space across existing Council offices and buildings without the need for the Civic Centre or a replacement building. The Council also determined there is sufficient capacity to accommodate additional staff in offices if needed in future.

- the Council is updating some of its remaining buildings to better suit the new operating model. It has already developed a new democratic hub and flexible working environment in the General Offices and is taking forward plans to remodel Anvil Court in Abertillery, its main office building since the closure of the Civic Centre. This will provide a better mix of confidential and collaborative spaces, improve ventilation, and create a more pleasant working environment.
- the community hub model shifts counter services and surgery style appointments between public and officers away from the Civic Centre and into library buildings around the county. The Council cites many benefits to this approach, including:
 - residents being able to access services locally, leading to reduced travel and a lower carbon impact.
 - encouraging increased footfall in town centres.
 - encouraging non-library users into libraries.
 - supporting residents to access services digitally through library computers.
 - signposting residents to other services delivered by the Council and partners, including those co-located in libraries such as credit unions, Careers Wales, etc. This approach was piloted by locality hubs during the pandemic and the Council reports positive impact and feedback.
- the Council did not fully consider the sustainable development principle and five ways of working when taking the decision to decommission the Civic Centre and move services to community hubs.
- no public engagement took place because of the challenges of doing so during the pandemic. So, although the hub model appears to have several benefits for residents, the Council lacks evidence to demonstrate that service users supported the changes. Engagement with residents would have provided the Council with useful information to shape the hub model, including:
 - public demand for services to be decentralised from the Civic Centre and into community hubs.
 - information on the types of services that users want to be able to access in the hubs (both Council and partner services).
 - preferred locations for hubs.
- the Council should consider how it can now seek the views of residents, both to provide assurance around its decision and to inform the future development of hubs. There is opportunity to incorporate this into the Council's upcoming review of its customer service offer, experience, and access points. The views of residents, in addition to the data the Council is capturing on hub use, will provide a strong evidence base on which to review the first year of the community hubs and assess the need for future refinements. The Council should also think about how it might adapt its

public engagement methods so it can continue to involve the public in the event of future lockdowns or other restrictions.

- we also saw limited consideration of the impact of decommissioning the Civic Centre on the local economy. The site will be used for housing, forming part of the Place Plan proposals for Ebbw Vale, which includes new housing and community facilities and improved access to the town centre. Whilst these plans appear to mitigate the impact of losing the Civic Centre on local businesses over the medium to longer term, we did not see evidence of modelling to compare the economic impact of closing the Civic Centre and proposed housing development. As part of the business case to acquire the Festival Park site, members received figures estimating the potential impact of new housing on the Civic Centre site on the local economy⁶ and council tax receipts. But no indication was given of the contribution of the Civic Centre to the local economy, either from staff or residents coming into Ebbw Vale to access services.
- in order to mitigate against the impact of decommissioning the Civic Centre, the Council should work with local businesses to monitor and understand the effect of the closure and what it can do to support them whilst the site remains vacant.
- the Council did, however, effectively engage with and involve staff whilst developing the new operating model and there was meaningful input from the trade union. The community hubs also demonstrate collaborative working with Aneurin Leisure Trust, in whose library buildings the hubs are based.
- members did not receive an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) to inform their decision to decommission the Civic Centre and move customer-facing services into community hubs. As a result, the decision was not compliant with the Equality Act 2010. The Council recognises its omission and plans to complete a retrospective EIA to understand the potential impact of its decision on people with protected characteristics. It is also using Audit Wales's recent report, Equality Impact Assessments: more than a tick box exercise?, to strengthen its EIA arrangements and develop training for staff.
- it is not yet clear what further changes the Council will make to the way it uses its buildings in the future. The Council's Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) runs from 2017-2022. It focuses on reducing the size and cost of the Council's property portfolio by:
 - reviewing the suitability of the current estate;
 - disposing of excess properties;
 - making better use of retained properties; and
 - ensuring buildings are as efficient as possible.

⁶ The Council cites Welsh Government statistics that weekly household spending on food, housing, fuel, transport, and recreation in the community averages around £458 per week in Wales. It uses this to estimate the annual impact of new housing on the local economy.

- the timing of our review in early 2022, when the SAMP expired, means the Council's future vision for its assets is not currently articulated in a long-term, forward-looking strategy. The Council's corporate asset management working group will oversee development of the new plan, ensuring input from across service areas. Officers are currently in discussion with neighbouring authorities to share best practice to inform the plan's development and the Council expects to involve the Executive in the process during the Autumn.
- discussions with officers suggest the new SAMP will:
 - reflect changes and learning from the pandemic.
 - place more emphasis on the decarbonisation and commercialisation agendas.
 - be more user-focussed, taking into account views from across service areas and partners to explore how spaces can be used differently.

however, the Council has not yet considered how it could use the sustainable development principle to develop its new SAMP.

- the Council intends to continue monitoring the amount of office space it needs and how staff are using spaces to inform ongoing decisions and adaptations. The Council will formally review the new operating model once it has had sufficient time to embed and will use this information to help shape further changes to the way it uses its buildings.
- the Council told us that decarbonisation will be a key driver for future changes. The current SAMP, which pre-dates the Council's 2020-2030 Decarbonisation Plan, makes several references to reducing carbon emissions and energy use and investigating renewable energy sources. The Decarbonisation Plan includes several 'transition pathways' relating to the Council's buildings and how they are used, including: construction and maintenance of buildings, electricity and heating of buildings, and staff travel to and within work, which will feed into the new SAMP. The Council is currently assessing the impact of the new operating model on decarbonisation and adapting its main office sites to meet staff demand for active travel. Officers are also investigating how Anvil Court (leased office building) could be made carbon neutral by 2030 and this will inform potential lease renewal in 2025.
- the Council's Bridging the Gap programme is also driving changes to the way the Council considers and uses assets. Strategic reviews are considering how to maximise use and value of current assets, identifying potential disposals and potential investments in property. This work has taken forward some elements of the SAMP, such as successfully developing a more commercial approach to the Council's industrial portfolio.
- the new operating model also aligns to the Council's Corporate Plan priority to be 'an efficient organisation and to operate using modern working practices in a way which supports the workforce, effective service delivery and improves access to Council business for our residents'.

- we saw some examples of the Council considering the impact of its use of assets on what other organisations are trying to achieve. For example, the new operating model aligns with Welsh Government’s long-term ambition for 30% of Welsh workers to work from home or near home. In addition to housing, the Council’s new democratic hub and council chamber, the General Offices in Ebbw Vale provide space for local business and communities to rent, houses the Gwent Archives on behalf of the five Gwent councils, and has been used by both the health board and Coleg Gwent. The Council is exploring how its 5G interactive classroom can be used as a regional asset that benefits communities and organisations across the region. We also saw evidence of the Council discussing how some of the properties it rents helps support the sustainability of community buildings and considering how this should inform decision-making. The Council should seek to expand upon these examples and continue to develop an ‘integrated’ approach to its use of assets so that they can help it meet a broader range of objectives.

The Council has appropriate arrangements to manage its assets but its understanding of how changes to service delivery will impact its long-term asset needs is limited

12 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council operates a corporate landlord model and asset management is centralised within the Estates and Property departments, part of the Community Services and Regeneration directorate. These arrangements bring specialist skills and knowledge to the management of buildings. However, some officers highlighted that capacity is an issue, impacting on the Council’s ability to make progress in some areas of asset management.
- under the corporate landlord model, all the Council’s buildings and maintenance budgets are held centrally rather than by individual services (although schools hold some maintenance budgets). This provides greater understanding of the overall portfolio, helping to support decision-making around assets. Close links with services are maintained through regular meetings between officers from Property Services and key contacts in each service. These key contacts also sit on the Council’s corporate asset management working group, which meets quarterly, bringing together relevant officers to review and discuss the strategic role of property at a corporate and service level. This includes consideration of:
 - Bridging the Gap property reviews
 - New operating model
 - Commercialisation of property assets
 - Decarbonisation
 - Individual service property business

- Links to partner organisations, eg PSB
- the Council has been proactively reviewing and reducing its property portfolio for several years. A workplace transformation project pre-dating the current SAMP reduced the number of offices from 11 to 2 key sites. The Council has also been reducing its property stock through disposal and community asset transfers (CAT), as well as the transfer of specific properties to the Aneurin Leisure Trust. A CAT Policy, and an Acquisitions and Disposals Policy support this process. As noted above, the Bridging the Gap programme is also reviewing the Council's assets to maximise their use and value.
- the Council has already changed the way it uses its buildings as a result of the pandemic, with agile working patterns for non-front-line staff reducing the amount of office space needed. There are also examples of changes to front-line services during the pandemic which may reduce need for buildings if adopted long term, eg social services providing support at home instead of in day care centres. As the Council gains a better understanding of how services will be delivered post-COVID-19, it should continue to review its building assets to make sure they meet changing needs.
- the SAMP includes a range of data on the Council's assets, including size, value, running costs, condition, repair backlog costs, and income. The Council has also established the carbon footprint of the buildings it uses (both owned and leased) and updates this annually to inform its decarbonisation work.
- this data is held on several systems. The main database holds all data on buildings, including condition surveys and cost of maintenance. Additional systems are used for energy use, reactive repairs and planned maintenance. Officers told us they have the information they need to make decisions on assets.
- the Council undertakes building condition surveys on a rolling five-year basis. It holds accurate data on around 70% of the portfolio but the remaining 30% is based on desktop survey work, using officer knowledge to determine an estimated position. Prior to decisions on the future of an asset – the Civic Centre, for example – the Council commissions an independent condition survey to inform members' decision-making.
- the Council installed carbon dioxide monitors early in the pandemic. These show where there are areas of good and bad air quality, and the Council will use this information to direct resources to improve air quality.
- there are several examples of co-location with other public sector organisations, which pre-date the pandemic, eg health and social services staff. The Council, working with Health partners, also set up COVID testing and vaccination centres in the county during the pandemic. The Council is aware that its decision to reduce its office space means potentially fewer opportunities to share its buildings with other organisations. However, the new model provides flexibility to adapt, and the Council is discussing

potential options with public sector organisations in the region, for example, in connection with its new depot facility. The Estates team also works closely with community groups in relation to CAT and Place Making plans and a third-sector group meets quarterly.

- in 2020, public sector organisations in Gwent agreed to collaborate to identify strategic approaches to a One Public Estate. However, progress has been limited due to the operational demands of responding to the pandemic.
- although members and officers we spoke to had an awareness of some of the long-term factors which will influence future need for and use of assets, other than decarbonisation these are not yet formally articulated. For example, several people we spoke to cited new technology and a shift to more digital services in future in response to demand from increasingly tech-savvy service users. The Council is currently developing an organisational approach to service redesign, which will link to its commercial strategy ambitions, digital programme and work it is undertaking on customer experience. Where appropriate, this will include a move to digital service offerings. When developing its new SAMP, the Council should ensure it gives sufficient consideration to the long term, including:
 - the work being undertaken around service redesign and how this might impact asset needs over the medium to long term.
 - long-term challenges and opportunities, such as decarbonisation and digital service delivery.
 - how it can draw on the above and plan over an appropriate time horizon.
- the Council has identified the capital and revenue costs of implementing and operating the new operating model over the next five years and this is reflected in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). In line with the Council's other strategies, the SAMP is not fully costed and incorporated into the MTFS. Instead, the costs are incorporated when individual aspects of the strategy are developed and approved to be taken forward. The Council should consider changing this approach so that indicative costs for implementing the new SAMP are built into the MTFS at an earlier stage, providing a more realistic forecast of future costs.

Senior managers and elected members receive regular information on specific asset-related projects, but the Council lacks a reporting mechanism for its Strategic Asset Management Plan

13 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- governance arrangements were affected by the pandemic, particularly in the earlier stages but these were restored with the use of remote technology to facilitate virtual, and later hybrid, meetings. COVID-19 has also impacted on

performance reporting more widely across the Council as key staff were redeployed to respond to the pandemic.

- although the SAMP refers to annual action plans and progress reports, there have been no recent reports on strategic asset management to elected members or the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). Members and senior officers receive regular updates on the Bridging the Gap property-related reviews and a brief summary of asset-related activity in the finance and performance quarterly updates and Commercial Strategy progress reports.
- a Programme Board, made up of CLT, also oversees the implementation and ongoing monitoring of the new operating system, including the decommissioning of the Civic Centre and repurposing of other buildings. The Council expects to review the new system in Autumn 2022 and will share its findings with elected members.
- the Council recently reviewed the focus of its corporate asset management working group. With additional groups and boards tasked with overseeing specific asset projects, such as Bridging the Gap reviews and the new operating model, the role of the group within that wider context had become unclear. Officers told us that, although it is early days, there is now greater clarity on their priorities and that the group is more focussed and attendance has improved.
- current arrangements mean both senior managers and elected members are sighted of the main asset-related activities. But the Council no longer draws together all asset-related actions and progress in a single report to provide strategic oversight and assurance. In developing its new SAMP, the Council should consider its monitoring and reporting structures to ensure better integration between specific assets projects and the broader asset management plan.
- some feedback on the community hubs has already been shared with scrutiny members. This included detail on footfall during the first three months of opening, a summary of the main requests for help and some case studies of the experiences of some hub users. However, the Council has not yet formally sought the views of residents on the community hubs, so the report did not contain any data on service user satisfaction levels. It is also not clear what the Council's measure of success is for the community hubs, both in the short and long term.
- in May 2022, the Council introduced a new committee structure. This includes a new Partnerships Scrutiny Committee which will consider the Council's strategic local, regional and national partnerships, including those related to assets.
- members of the property team meet regularly with colleagues across Wales through the Consortium of Local Authorities in Wales. This provides a useful platform to share ideas and views and learn from others. It is officer led but governed by a board of political leaders.

- performance data is shared with the Welsh Government but the Council does not undertake its own benchmarking against other local authorities.

Workforce

The Council has implemented a flexible, agile working model but its workforce planning arrangements are underdeveloped

14 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- as noted above, during the pandemic the Council developed a new operating model, based on agile working. The model categorises job roles into three classifications:
 - home worker (approx. 22% of roles);
 - agile worker (approx. 23%); or
 - service/community worker (approx. 55%).
- agile workers split their time between working from home and from hot desks in Council offices, using an online booking system to reserve a desk space.
- the Council involved all staff in the categorisation of their job roles. The categorisation refers to job roles, rather than the staff currently undertaking the roles. This means that staff whose job role is classed as home-working but who, for personal reasons, need to work partly from the office can do so. But when that job role is advertised in future, it will state the role's classification.
- a new Agile Working Policy supports the operating model. Under the policy, home and agile workers do not have fixed hours (unless a particular role dictates this) and can work flexibly within the flexible working hours scheme to suit their circumstances. The policy sets out corporate, management and employee responsibilities in relation to agile working and emphasises staff well-being and work-life balance.
- it is not clear yet what further changes the Council will make to the way it uses its workforce in future. A review of the new model, scheduled for Autumn 2022, will provide some direction, as will the Council's Bridging the Gap programme, particularly the review looking at service redesign, referred to in the assets section above. But the ongoing impact of the pandemic and Brexit on working models and workforce requirements is not yet fully understood.
- officers and members referred to several drivers for change which are likely to influence the future workforce, demonstrating consideration of long-term trends. As with assets, decarbonisation and digital delivery of services are considered key factors. Another was the Council's ageing staff profile (50% of staff are 45 years and over) and the challenge of making local

government an attractive career option to younger people. The Council recognises that flexible working and diverse opportunities are going to be increasingly important to attract new staff and that this will require a shift from current practices. There are also wider issues around recruitment and retention which would benefit from being addressed on a national level before effective action can be taken at a regional and local level. The Council should ensure its workforce planning processes actively consider and help address these potential long-term workforce trends as well as addressing current issues. As the Council gains a better understanding of how services will be delivered post-COVID-19, it will need to review its workforce plans to ensure they reflect changing needs.

- in July 2021, the Council agreed a new five-year Workforce Strategy. The Strategy contains high-level aspirational statements setting out the type of employer it wishes to be and what the Council needs to look like in the future. Although the Strategy includes a section setting out how the Council will achieve their workforce ambitions, this lacks tangible detail. The Strategy has an annual action plan, but this is also high level and lacks baseline data and measurable targets.
- the Workforce Strategy contains some data and analysis of the current workforce, such as age profile, length of service, and employment status, but certain aspects are missing such as:
 - current skills and any current or future skills gaps.
 - talent and succession planning.
 - critical posts to the Council and risks attached to those posts if they become vacant.

this information is currently being gathered through directorate workforce plans. Useful workforce data and analysis also sits outside of the Strategy, for example, workforce profiling and analysis of staff turnover and vacancies.

- the Strategy does not set out how it is embedded into service plans, but as part of the new Strategy, all directorates must complete a new workforce plan template developed by the Organisational Development (OD) section. Responsibility for developing and implementing the plan sits with each directorate and the Council should ensure that service managers have sufficient capacity and support to undertake this task properly. OD will also support services to develop and drive implementation of the plans where necessary. This is important, as while service-based managers might have service/industry-specific knowledge to inform the plans, they may benefit from the input of HR professionals to direct and challenge their thinking, provide guidance on more general workforce planning issues, and bring oversight from an all-Council perspective.
- there was some consideration of the sustainable development principle in developing the Strategy. For example, the Council engaged with the trade unions and used staff survey responses to inform its Strategy. But further

work is needed to ensure the sustainable development principle is fully embedded and helping shape future strategies.

- the Council has given some consideration to how its agile working policy helps contribute to other things it is trying to achieve, eg decarbonisation. But it could do more to consider how the policy, its workforce strategy and planning can help it meet other objectives and achieve wider benefits.

The Council is supporting staff to adjust to agile working but does not yet fully understand its future workforce needs, although work is underway to develop service workforce plans

15 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has engaged well with staff and the trade union during the pandemic and in developing its new operating model. Trade union representatives were included in discussions from the outset and have helped inform the model and the Agile Working Policy.
- the Council produced a staff engagement plan to introduce the new operating model and concept of agile working to staff. This included focus groups, sessions with SLT, and training for managers on how to manage an agile workforce.
- the Council is part of the Gwent-based Shared Resource Service, a collaborative information technology service between five public sector partners. This arrangement helped the Council to quickly enable staff and members to work remotely.
- the Agile Working Policy provides some protocols to help manage some of the practical challenges of staff working flexible hours and remotely. For example, staff are expected to keep electronic diaries up to date, switch off laptops and phones when not working, not hold face-to-face work meetings at home, and not share details of their home address or phone number to clients or third parties.
- front-line staff who were unable to work from home and whose services operated throughout the pandemic faced a different set of challenges. The Council undertook risk-assessments and provided PPE and changed working practices to keep staff and the public safe. Redeployment of staff also helped the Council to continue to deliver critical front-line services.
- some front-line services benefitted during the pandemic from a resilient integrated workforce model that was adopted prior to COVID-19. For example, staff from across waste and recycling, highways, and green spaces are trained to work across the different departments to provide cover when needed. This flexibility to adapt meant the Council was well placed to continue delivering essential services such as waste collections during the pandemic. The Council should consider how it can continue to build

transferable skills in its workforce and how it can record in its workforce data the transferable skills staff already have so that these skills are recognised and can be utilised effectively.

- there are several examples of the Council working with others to deliver services, although these were not specifically prompted by the pandemic. Some, such as the recent agreement for Caerphilly County Borough Council to deliver legal services for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's Children's Services, help address challenges recruiting into professional roles. Others, such as the Council's Property Services' Technical Team undertaking work for other local authorities, provide an income and strengthen resilience by enabling the Council to maintain a larger team. There is, however, scope to take a more systematic approach to collaborative working and the Council should consider this as it reviews how services are delivered.
- the Council produced an equality impact assessment for its Agile Working Policy, but members did not receive an impact assessment to inform decision making on the wider operating model.
- the Council has estimated the revenue costs of its new agile working model, including initial set-up costs and an ongoing home/agile working allowance for around 750 staff. The Council will fund these costs through repurposing budgets for mileage, and savings on Civic Centre operating costs. Savings from the new operating model will be reflected in the Bridging the Gap programme's transformation project and reported to members.
- the Council has not identified any indicative costs of delivering the Workforce Strategy. This is in line with the Council's other strategies, where costs are not calculated or incorporated into the MTFS until individual aspects of the strategy are developed and approved to be taken forward. As suggested above in relation to the SAMP, the Council should consider estimating the indicative costs of implementing the whole Strategy, so it understands the resource implications.
- sickness rates have been affected by the pandemic and the Council's recovery plan includes an aim to reduce absence rates. Initially, sickness absence fell – in 2020-21 the Council had an average rate of 11.67 days per employee, down 2.24 days on the previous year. But rates have risen in 2021-22 and the Council's benchmarking suggests that Blaenau Gwent has the worst performance in Wales on sickness. The Council reports that sickness absence with COVID-19 is not a significant problem, but its OD team is seeking to understand to what extent the pandemic is indirectly affecting absence rates, eg long NHS waiting times, mental health issues etc.
- staff recruitment challenges have continued through the pandemic. Competition for social workers and domiciliary care workers is recognised as a regional and national concern and the Council is experiencing staffing pressures in social services. The Council is working hard to address these

gaps and a two-year staff vacancy action plan has been developed by Children's Services to help address the issue. University social work student placements help provide additional capacity and the Council has a good track record of recruiting these students once they qualify. It also encourages existing non-qualified staff to train as social workers and has a joint Social Worker Development Strategy with Caerphilly Council.

- other Council services have also experienced recruitment difficulties, particularly to professional and technical posts. There are examples of these services also seeking to develop existing staff or apprentices to train and qualify to address hard-to-fill posts. It is not clear, however, how widespread or consistent this approach is as there is no Council-wide workforce plan. Once services have completed their individual workforce plans, the Council should consider how it can best bring that information together to gain an overview of the Council-wide position and understand what actions it needs to take at a corporate level to strengthen its workforce over the long term. This information should also feed into the Council's workforce recovery plan, which is currently being developed and includes a focus on recruitment and retention.

The Council is making arrangements to review its new operating model but does not yet have a clear set of criteria to assess progress against its Workforce Strategy

16 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- a Programme Board, chaired by the Managing Director oversees delivery of the new operating model. As noted in the assets section above, the Council plans to formally review the new operating system in Autumn 2022. The findings will be used to refine and adapt the model and will be shared with elected members.
- CLT have received regular updates throughout the pandemic on workforce capacity (including sickness absence and the impact of COVID-19) and the Council's ability to deliver critical services (responding to COVID-19 and business as usual).
- following some disruptions and delays to performance reporting during the height of the pandemic, elected members are once again receiving reports on workforce issues. Recent reports relating to or including workforce issues include sickness absence, recovery planning and quarterly finance and performance reports.
- some workforce-related issues, such as sickness absence, have clear targets against which performance can be measured and challenged. However, the Workforce Strategy lacks robust monitoring arrangements and measurable targets. An annual delivery plan for the Strategy will be monitored each year by the Corporate Leadership Team and Corporate Overview Scrutiny. But without specific and measurable targets, it is not

clear how progress against these plans will be measured or effectively scrutinised. The Council intends to use the directorate workforce plans currently being developed to inform the Workforce Strategy's year 2 action plan. In doing so, the Council should include SMART performance targets.

- officers have continued to meet with peers through national HR networks during the pandemic and the Head of OD is part of an WLGA working group looking at pay spines in local government.
- the Council's OD team benchmarks national workforce data to understand where the Council is an outlier. For sickness absence, where the Council performs poorly, representatives met with a well-performing neighbouring authority to learn from their approach.
- the Council has engaged with staff regularly throughout the pandemic. An employee survey ran in Autumn 2020 to gain feedback on homeworking to help inform the new operating model. Also, all staff were met with individually to discuss the new model. In Spring 2022, the Council will consult with staff on the behaviours that make agile working a success, based on their experiences so far. The process will also consider behaviours for home-based and service/community-based staff.



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