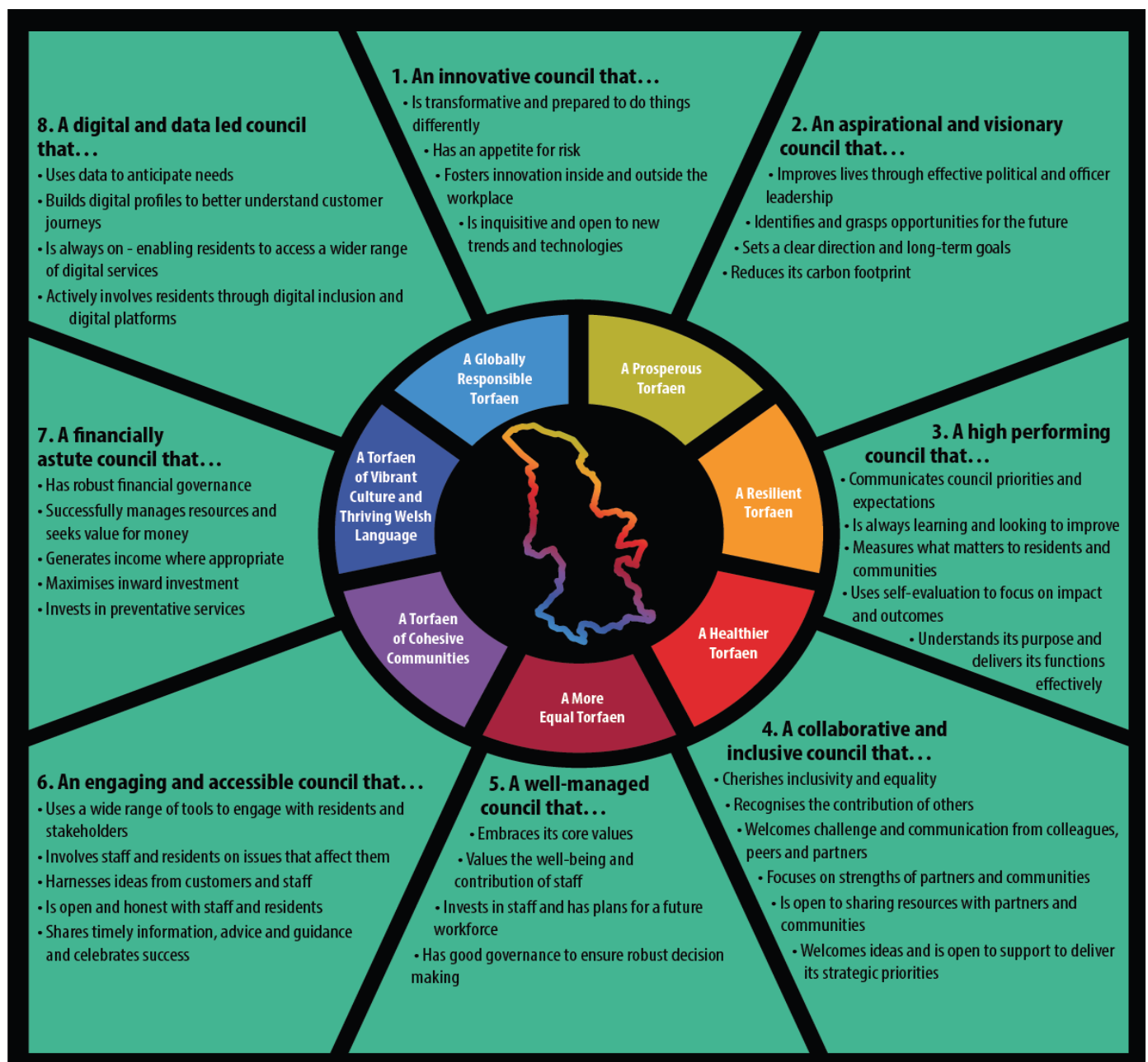


Torfaen: Becoming an Outstanding Council

It is important to the organisation, to not just review the services we are delivering to our residents and businesses, and the impact they are having, but we must also ensure that our own internal processes and systems are working well, ensuring we are using the resources available to us as efficiently and effectively as possible, with robust controls, systems and processes supporting every aspect of the Council's activity.

The development of our County Plan was important in setting our priorities and commitments, but without defined specific organisational conditions, we will never be as effective as we can be in delivering upon all of the outcomes we are seeking to achieve.

To support this endeavour, we developed framework comprising of a set of 8 characteristics, which we used to define what an outstanding Council looks like to assess our performance against (*see diagram below*). This framework provides a structure which we have used, alongside our County Plan, to provide a focus for organisational development and to develop our annual self-assessment. This is the third year of reporting, against our Characteristics of an Outstanding Council.



The framework for an Outstanding Council was developed considering what is important from our own perspective, but we have also embraced the Well-Being of Future Generations Act 2015, considering the

sustainability principle and the 7 defined areas of corporate governance. These characteristics, along with our organisational values will help us create the right conditions to apply the five ways of working in a consistent and meaningful way.

Each characteristic is further defined by a set of supporting statements and further work was undertaken to better define our characteristics which has resulted in a set of descriptors for each supporting statement. This further helps us to explain what we believe outstanding looks like and to help us evaluate what areas we need to be concentrating on to help us get there. This enables the Council to be clear on the areas the Council is looking to improve in pursuit of being an outstanding council. These descriptors can be viewed [here](#).

Throughout the year, we have carried out various monitoring exercises against the activities we deemed areas for improvement or development within last year's self-assessment report. These activities are reflected in the appropriate Service Plans and are monitored on a quarterly basis by the Directorates and reported to our Executive Team twice a year. Where there are areas, we feel haven't improved as intended we will continue to monitor closely in the year ahead, to help achieve our ambition to become an outstanding Council.

Following review, we have used our framework to undertake an organisational self-assessment, drawing conclusions and setting out the actions that need to be taken, going forward. Progress against our commitments is monitored each year, and our key findings have been reported within the following section of this report.

Key Learning from Self-Assessing our Characteristics of an Outstanding Council

Our self-assessment has been developed using the extensive information we have available to us, in order to produce a rounded picture of our Council. An overview of the key learning and findings are set out below:

1. An innovative Council that...

- Is transformative and prepared to do things differently
- Has an appetite for risk
- Fosters innovation inside and outside the workplace
- Is inquisitive and open to new trends and technologies

Key Developments

Our focus has developed over the last year, in line with our characteristics and many changes have taken place to help us become more innovative, as a Council. Importantly, we have continued to adjust quickly and respond positively to new challenges and initiatives, demonstrating that there is a willingness to adapt and deliver in ever changing circumstances. Indeed our recent Panel Performance Assessment concluded that, *'Faced with rising demand, particularly in social care and financial challenges the Council has adopted an ambitious plan to federate with Blaenau Gwent, adopt the Marmot principles and pursue Early Intervention and Prevention. This vision and strategy aims to tackle health inequality in the county and the sustainability challenge. This approach is innovative and of national interest'*. However, as we move forward, we must match our willingness to take risks and deliver new innovative projects, with the pragmatism required to bring projects to an end when it is clear we are unable to take them forward or they will not deliver intended benefits.

At the end of 2023, we set out a new way of working, which we branded as 'Rebel Torfaen'. This new way of working enables our staff to feel empowered to put their ideas forward for improving services, through a variety of staff led groups, considering some of the strategic challenges facing the Council and mirroring the challenges being considered by the Leadership Team. The aim being to offer a broader and more diverse view and response to the challenges that we are facing.

Introducing an 'ideas culture', is enabling our staff to feel empowered to put their ideas forward for improving services, through a variety of staff led groups. During 2024/25 Rebel Torfaen Groups have been established and training provided to facilitators to support groups to undertake their work. The group has already explored some areas of service improvement. Internal review has determined that there is more work still to be done to embed the Rebel Torfaen Groups into the work of the Council. This will provide focus for the year ahead and will be taken forward as part of our work with Blaenau Gwent.

During 2024/25 we have focussed on developing the skills, knowledge and experience of all our staff so they are able to meet changing demands in service delivery and priorities. We have developed and implemented an online recruitment and induction process during the year, whilst also rolling out a new Learning and Development platform called Thinkqi that provides accessible training and development information to meet the needs of individuals and services

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- Understand and Reduce Silo Working by: Introducing an 'ideas culture', enabling our staff to feel empowered to put their ideas forward for improving services, through a variety of staff led groups.
- Consider digital solutions to reduce time spent on administrative tasks
- Provide learners with a physical environment that promotes positive engagement and supports learning

2. An aspirational and visionary council that...

- Improves lives through effective political and officer leadership
- Identifies and grasps opportunities for the future
- Sets a clear direction and long-term goals
- Reduces its carbon footprint

Key Developments

We have set a clear direction within our organisation and share our long-term goals for improving Well-Being across Torfaen. Our 5-year County Plan and longer term Master Plan does this by setting out clearly the outcomes/objectives/activities that we are aiming to achieve and is well understood and supported politically and organisationally.

The annual Delivery Plan for each financial year continues to be used to monitor and report our progress against our aspirations for the lifespan of the County Plan. We also continue to work alongside our partners in the Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) by working together to become a 'Marmot' region with the intent of taking evidence-based action to reduce inequalities and address key challenges to current and long-term well-being across the region, to reduce the inequities that affect the wider determinants of health.

Our Marmot Masterplan was adopted by full Council in October 2024 (as part of the 2023-24 Annual Self-Assessment and Well-Being Report). Since that point further work has been undertaken to ensure the agreed performance framework supporting our Masterplan has been incorporated into the Council's Service Plans. Organisational wide understanding of the Marmot Principles underpinning our Masterplan are regularly supported through e-mail bulletins.

We have secured £5 million research investment, aiming to tackle health inequalities and improve health outcomes for our residents. The Department of Health and Social Care, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), is making this investment through the Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs) over the next 5 years.

HDRC Torfaen will see research and data experts work alongside the council and communities to examine how health and well-being outcomes can be improved in a sustainable way.

This is the latest stage in the council's mission to transform health and well-being inequalities in Torfaen, working with the health service, community councils, housing associations and charities in areas that have the biggest impact on people's long-term health outcomes.

We face a significant challenge to reverse the stark health inequalities that exist within our communities, therefore we are embracing this challenge to ensure resources are targeted to where it can have the greatest impact on lives. By improving research and collaboration, we can get to the root causes of inequality and devise interventions that can have the greatest impact on public health.

Our HDRC is progressing well, with the focus over 2024/25 being the development of the HDRC's research strategy and putting a team in place to deliver on our ambitions. Due to the progress made in the HDRC development year, the NIHR (National Institute of Health and Care Research) have awarded Torfaen full HDRC status, confirming a further 5 years of funding. A final recruitment drive at the end of 2024/25 has meant all but one posts have been successfully appointed.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of our process of developing and implementing the Torfaen Deal, we will,
 - Initiate early help and prevention-first redesigns
 - Support the organisation to embed the Marmot principles into everything we do, by: Developing and communicating a consistent narrative throughout the organisation to enable each part of the organisation to understand how they can connect and contribute to both: our organisation's well-being objectives and Marmot Principles.
 - Continuing to embed the Marmot Principles into Service Planning and Governance arrangements, via the new County Plan/Marmot Performance Indicators Performance Management Framework.
- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent, we will,
 - Launch our deal with three-year transformation plan

3. A high performing council that...

- Communicates council priorities and expectations
- Is always learning and looking to improve
- Measures what matters to residents and communities
- Uses self-evaluation to focus on impact and outcomes
- Understands its purpose and delivers its functions effectively

Key Developments

Positive building blocks continue to be put into place to help us achieve our ambition of becoming a high performing council. We have reviewed the way in which we carry out our Residents Survey and capture other feedback from our customers - to ensure we receive the right feedback from the right customers at the right time. Having taken part in the development of a national resident's survey alongside other local authorities, the WLGA and Data Cymru, we made the survey available to residents towards the end of 2024 resulting in an excellent response rate. We now report every 6 months to our Leadership Team on any work undertaken that provides us with service user perspectives giving us greater insights on the views of our residents ensuring feedback we are receiving is being properly disseminated, understood and actioned.

We know that to take our aspiration of becoming a high performing Council to the next level we need to become more data and intelligence driven going forward. During the year we targeted a number of projects with further intensive support where greater knowledge and understanding of performance was needed. These have included:

- Work to safely reduce the number of children looked after,
- Remodelling of our Early Intervention and Prevention services,
- Development of systems to better understand energy usage and carbon emissions across the Council's estate, and
- Performance of our waste and recycling services.

The introduction of the of Power BI will support our aspiration to become a more data and intelligence driven organisation, through improving the accessibility and visibility of data. Having undertaken projects in service areas across the Council we are now looking at how this project can be delivered centrally by the Shared

Resource Service (SRS), our IT support provider. Moving into 2025/26 we will look to prioritise work to automate dashboards for reporting on the Council's Marmot Masterplan through Power BI.

During 2024/25 we have also been in the process of developing our Asset Management Strategy for the Council's estate to ensure we are utilising our buildings efficiently and appropriately. The process has been slightly delayed but the new Asset Management Strategy is now timetabled for approval in July.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent, we will...
 - Develop performance and risk management frameworks
- Explore ways of receiving better intelligence from residents by: Undertaking the annual Residents Survey and capturing service user perspectives from surveys and any other feedback from our customers via our communication channels to ensure we receive the right feedback from the right customers at the right time
- Identify gaps in our data by: Identify the data Directorates need to make evidence-based decisions to through addressing the most significant challenges in each Directorate.
- Improving our data capability – Continue to work on the introduction of Power BI - to support our aspiration to become a more data and intelligence driven organisation, through improving the accessibility and visibility of data
- Explore a range of mechanisms to improve public engagement in the scrutiny process, including, working with groups, such as the Youth Forum and Torfaen People's Panel to explore involvement in the scrutiny process
- Reviewing our estate to ensure we are utilising our buildings efficiently and appropriately by: Preparing a new comprehensive and integrated Five-Year Asset Management Strategy and Implementation/Investment Plan
- Work with HR to ensure the most effective operational use is made of the Civic Centre
- Review whether the new suite of systems and performance data for the Front Door and Reablement on the Balanced Scorecard is effectively tracking the performance of health & social care outcomes.
- We will be a digitally enabled and efficient council providing excellent customer service, allowing more residents to complete their transactions online. We will digitise Missed Bins and Assisted Collection Requests to be fully managed online (Linked to Work Stream 1 - Quality of Service)
- Improve outcomes for learners, in literacy and numeracy

4. A collaborative and inclusive council that...

- Cherishes inclusivity and equality
- Recognises the contribution of others
- Welcomes challenge and communication from colleagues, peers and partners
- Focuses on strengths of partners and communities
- Is open to sharing resources with partners and communities
- Welcomes ideas and is open to support to deliver its strategic priorities

Key Developments

We cherish and embrace inclusivity and equalities within the organisation. We embrace and celebrate our neurological differences within our council, because they enable us to perform a wide variety of job roles and deliver diverse services, to our communities.

In January 2025, we set up 'Diverse Minds', which is a Torfaen staffing group that has been created with the intention of providing a dedicated space where colleagues can share their experiences of neurodivergent conditions (dyslexia, ADHD, Autism etc) and discuss the impacts and challenges they may face in life and at work. The focus is around how people experience these conditions in the workplace, sharing strategies to alleviate some of the challenges, and recognising the positive aspects of these conditions.



Group members have the opportunity to share ideas and strategies on a regular basis, in an informal setting. We are proud of our ongoing commitment to neurodiversity through initiatives like Rebel Torfaen and Diverse Minds Torfaen. These programmes highlight our dedication to creating an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive.

Our adopted 'Community Wellbeing Strategy' in April 2024, sets out a new vision and mission for the Council to put 'communities' and 'well-being & prevention' as genuine cornerstones in the way we design our services. We have continued to encourage community involvement in practical changes in the borough, for example facilitating a discussion between Torfaen Voluntary Alliance (TVA), Bridges and Blaenavon 50+ Forum around the challenges of transportation in the north. Our Canal Co-Ordinator embraced being introduced to Torfaen Access Forum and members supported on-site decision making regarding both locations of new additional benches near Two Locks and Five Locks and practical installation considerations. We have an ongoing piece of work across the council to understand our volunteering approaches and practices, to inform a more co-ordinated approach going forward. In addition, the principles of the communities approach are informing service re-design across a number of teams linked to early intervention and prevention.

During the year we have been embedding our approach to participation across the Council by ensuring all Directorates within our organisation embed the requirements of our Participation Strategy, which will provide our residents with appropriate opportunities to have their say on the way in which we work and the decisions that may impact on them. We have formed a new staff Participatory Group that will help ensure future engagement and consultations are well planned, inclusive and accessible. We've also continued to see a clear link between the promotion of social media campaigns for each consultation and a steady increase in the number of site registrations on our online engagement portal (Get Involved).



Closer Working in Blaenau Gwent, enables us to explore more collaborative opportunities across Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent to improve efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability, setting out options for both councils to decide on ways forward over short, medium and longer terms. In January 2025 councillors in Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen agreed to work together as equal partners, providing the opportunity for sharing resources and expertise to address common challenges, and improve outcomes for residents. This included the formal appointment of a Joint Chief Executive. This has led to the establishment of a joint Executive Leadership Team, with 3 of the new directors being shared positions across both Councils. All directors are looking at how the new structures will look and further discussions and engagement has taken place with staff and trade unions.

A policy framework will establish the contractual arrangements for joint roles, and for a transformation team that will support and facilitate the delivery of the transformation plan. Local Partnerships who facilitated the initial Discovery review are developing a strategic outline case, including a financial model and criteria for service alignment and prioritisation.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent we will,

- Work with Welsh Government & WLGA networks to gain support, share learning and influence national policy direction
- As part of our process of developing and implementing the Torfaen Deal, we will,
 - Establish strategic partnerships with Welsh Government, WLGA, and public sector partners to align on Marmot prevention, equity, and resilience
- Take forward the Communities Strategy Approach by: Improving the planning of priorities at a local level, ensuring that community delivery is a key principle in service design, increasing the number of volunteers in the community, and matching volunteers and community groups to service delivery.
- Embed the new Participation Strategy across the Council by: Ensuring all Directorates within our organisation embed the requirements of our Participation Strategy, which will provide our residents with appropriate opportunities to have their say on: the way in which we work and the decisions that we need to take that may affect them.
- Closer Working in Blaenau Gwent: Continue to maximise collaborative opportunities across Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent, strengthening integration to improve efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability.
- Ensure that specified training is provided to staff online and face to face and reporting mechanisms are in place, in the required mandatory subjects including Safeguarding, VAWDASV, Equalities and Diversity
- Establish a baseline of recruitment data and assess the diversity of job applicants and recipients to understand what further interventions are required
- Creation of and participation in research networks to share research ideas, best practice, processes, learning and co-production of future research

5. A well-managed council that...

- Embraces its core values
- Values the well-being and contribution of staff
- Invests in staff and has plans for a future workforce
- Has good governance to ensure robust decision making

Key Developments

The well-being and contribution of our staff is valued and is fundamental to the delivery of high-quality services. During the last year, we have undertaken significant work to further strengthening our approach around our Workforce Strategy. Our strategy sets out how through our workforce we will achieve the strategic aims of our County Plan, key legal duties and provides information of how the Council will take forward our characteristics of an outstanding council. Our strategy focuses on staff wellbeing and development.

A Workforce Strategy delivery plan has been developed and embedded into our Service Plans. Frequent performance reporting takes place into our Leadership Team. Some of the key activities that have been taken forward in the last year have been the,

- implementation of an apprenticeship programme,
- the development of well-being programme for staff that provides targeted support to managers where issues are highlighted. This will include the roll out of Mental Health First Aiders and specific targeted events for men's mental health and financial wellbeing, and
- The introduction of a new performance appraisal system following the input from our staff focus group to ensure ideas are provided by a range of staff on issues that affect them and imbedded into our appraisal system. The new approach went live during 2025.

In February 2025, as part of the National Apprentice week, we launched our latest group of Torfaen apprentices who joined our organisation. Our apprentices are part of a wider career development

programme, which already has over 100 employees working towards new qualifications. We recognise the important role our apprentices will play in helping us to deliver excellent services and help us to deliver upon our priorities, now and in the future. We will be recruiting the next group of apprentices, after the school exams in the summer of 2025.

Our staff survey undertaken in November 2024 provided a further opportunity to assess progress made as an employer. We were pleased to note a significant positive improvements were recorded for large number of the survey questions including the following:

- I get job satisfaction from my job
- There is a positive working atmosphere within the council
- I believe there is opportunity to develop my career at Torfaen
- My Manager/Supervisor sets a good example for others to follow
- My manager treats me with dignity, courtesy and respect
- I feel confident that issues raised in this survey will be acted upon and make a difference
- I believe the employee survey is still an important way to have my say

Furthermore, at the end of March 2025, our Council was named as one of the best employers by the Financial Times. Around 20,000 employees in the UK were surveyed by the FT and Statista for the inaugural edition of this annual list. Workers were asked to give their opinions on statements about their current employer in areas including working conditions, potential for development and company image. Our Council was one of only four local authorities within Great Britain to be included, in the top 500 list.

Following our decision to formalise our approach to working more closely with Blaenau Gwent there is a need to ensure that managerial and decision-making arrangements are both consistent and effective. Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent staff have been trained in the use of a diagnostic tool that will be used to assess the effectiveness of current and future organisational structures within and across both organisations. Organisational structural changes are underway to support the development of the federated model of working between Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen. However, there is still further work needed through the transformation programme to deliver structural changes within services as they are reviewed.

Governance arrangements continue to remain strong within our organisation - the annual governance statement (AGS) confirms that our approach remains robust, and audit feedback in relation to governance is largely positive. Evidence we have obtained, including largely positive feedback from audit and our Panel Performance Assessment demonstrates there is good governance structures and processes in place, that supports robust decision making.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent...
 - Implement a new group at the Executive Team aimed at developing and aligning governance and assurance structures and processes across Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent councils.
 - Co-designed cultural values and workforce development plans
- As part of our process of developing and implementing the Torfaen Deal:
 - Launch Our Deal and the Marmot-aligned vision, embed and integrate the five missions of the Deal in the Council's work and ensure staff and partner organisations are trained to understand what the Deal means for them.
- Identify gaps in our data by: Identifying the data Directorates need to make evidence based decisions to through addressing the most significant challenges in each Directorate
- Strengthening our workforce effectively by: Undertaking a recruitment campaign and developing an apprentice support network"
- Strengthening our workforce effectively by: Developing a Wellbeing Programme for all staff
- Support the delivery of the Council's statutory Panel Performance Assessment (required once every electoral cycle under the Local Government and Elections Act 2021).
- Ensure that managerial and decision-making arrangements are effective by: Reviewing and adjusting the Council's organisational structures and its spans and layers with the support of the Local Government Association and utilising the Decision-Making Accountability Tool.
- Develop recruitment and retention for all workers in Torfaen. To enable a stable workforce to be able to be maintained

6. An engaging and accessible council that...

- Uses a wide range of tools to engage with residents and stakeholders
- Involves staff and residents on issues that affect them
- Harnesses ideas come from customers and staff
- Is open and honest with staff and residents
- Shares timely information, advice and guidance and celebrates success

Key Developments

There are important benefits of engaging with our staff, residents and stakeholders and we continue to work with as many groups and forums as possible, to ensure they are involved in the issues that affect them. We have good and well-established forums and networks (Citizens Panel, Youth Forum etc) who are largely engaged on the decisions and developments we are making. We also have a number of Member Champions split between cabinet members and back bench members who are also engaged on decisions relevant to the areas they represent. Some of our Member Champions include our Equalities & Diversity Champion, Carers Champion, Sustainability Champion and Mental Health Champion.

We communicate openly and honestly with residents and Members. This communication is frequent and through variety of mediums, which has proven to be highly productive, with large amounts of interactions and feedback. We celebrate our successes well and are open and honest in areas where our plans have not been delivered, as intended.

The challenges we face are complex. They involve multiple factors, inter-dependencies, and a variety of uncertainties, and our success in tackling them, will require more than just our individual hard work, motivation, or even talent.

Engaging with our residents to inform council services....



At the beginning of December 2024, we launched a resident's survey, as part of a Wales-wide listening exercise.

'Let's Talk: Living in Torfaen' survey gave an opportunity for our residents to share their opinions on life, in the borough and their experiences of using our council services

We were one of a number of councils across Wales running the survey produced by the Data Cymru, on behalf of the Welsh Local Government Association.

Our residents' views are important to us, as they will help us to shape local services and ways in which we deliver them. The questions asked in the survey are also being asked across Wales, by many other local councils, who are also running this national survey.

Our People's Panel....

In September 2024, our residents were invited to take part in discussions, ahead of next year's council budget.

Residents were able to comment on our draft 2025/26 budget and were invited to return again in the New Year, after Welsh Government's budget settlement has been announced.

At this public meeting, our Head of Financial Services outlined how we set our annual budget, taking into account anticipated funding, predicted cost increases and expected demand for services.



Our People's Panel also had the opportunity to discuss and put forward ideas on how improvements could be made to our Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees, to make it easier for residents to be involved.

Our Youth Forum....

Over the past year, we have introduced new mechanisms by which the council can engage with more young people. These include a new larger Youth Forum made up of pupils from the borough's six secondary schools, the formation of a new Torfaen Youth Alliance, made up of representatives from a wide range of young people's organisations, and closer working relationships with schools' participation officers.

The aim of our Youth Alliance is to provide young people with a forum to come together to discuss issues, such as health and well-being, and any other issues that are important to them. They are able to share opinions and work together to provide a clear and strong voice back to our Council, and other partner organisations, to help ensure their views and needs are heard.

Our Youth Forum is open to young people, aged between 11 and 18.

At the end of October 2024, our Torfaen Youth Forum elected a new chair and two deputy chairs for the year ahead.

A year 11 pupil from Ysgol Gymraeg Gwynllyw was elected chair, after pledging prioritise young people's mental well-being and support forum members to lobby their schools for positive change and pupils from Torfaen Learning Zone and West Monmouth School, were voted in as deputy chairs.

After the election, our 15 members of the Youth Forum discussed health and well-being challenges facing young people in Torfaen and reviewed the council's draft Children and Young People's Participation Strategy.

This strategy is due to go to Cabinet later in the year and, if approved, will set the standard for how all council services will consult and consider young people's opinions in the future.



The forum also agreed their work programme for the next year. They agreed to focus on litter, bullying and the health risks from vaping.

A separate junior forum for primary school pupils is also being developed.

The outcome of our first youth alliance meeting will be reported back into Council, who will then follow-up with the youth alliance, at its next meeting in early 2025.

Our Senior Leadership Team and Education Leaders have made listening to young people a corporate priority. Earlier this year, the senior leadership team invited young people to "take over" several senior council roles for the day and make decisions on issues including behaviour in schools and the environment. In the New Year, the Rebel Torfaen initiative to increase cognitive diversity in the decision-making process will also be expanded to include a new Rebel Youth group.

Representatives from youth forums across Gwent, also agreed to work more closely together in a new initiative.

Our Torfaen Youth Forum Deputy Chairs hosted the first regional meeting at Civic Centre, in Pontypool, in December 2024, welcoming representatives from Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly youth forums and discussed the topics their forums were interested in, such as bullying, mental health, vaping and littering.

They shared examples of their forums' work and discussed how to reach more young people, such as through school councils, junior forums and social media.

The regional youth forum is a great way for local youth forums to discuss issues that are common to young people in their areas and to share ideas. It is also a good platform for understanding how young people are

able to get their voices heard on a national level, such as through the Welsh Youth Parliament or the UK Youth Parliament.

The group has agreed to meet four times a year. The next regional meeting, which will include Newport and Monmouthshire representatives, will meet in the spring.

Later on in December, a draft Children and Young People's Participation Strategy was also discussed by Members of our Cross-Cutting, Resources and Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This meeting was attended by youth forum members.

Young people's take over day....

At the end of May 2024, a group of our secondary school pupils swapped their classrooms for our Council's boardroom, as part of the council's first-ever Young People's Take Over Day.

14 pupils from Croesyceiliog School, Cwmbran High School and West Monmouth School applied to take over five leadership roles with the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Children and Families Director, Adult and Communities Director and Head of Communications, Engagement and Civil Contingencies.

The day began with a Leadership Team meeting where they agreed a series of actions on school attendance/behaviour and our "Raise the Rate" waste recycling campaign.

Pupils also met with our Human Resources Team to help shape our council's work experience and apprenticeship programme and got the chance to quiz our Chief Executive about what is being done to support schools and pupils, especially those with mental or emotional issues.

The day concluded with a Policy Development Forum where they met and made recommendations to our Cabinet Members.

It is vital we take young people's views into account when we are making decisions and we are hoping that this will become an annual event and form part of a range of measures to engage with our young people, including through our Youth Forum and our new Youth Alliance.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of our process of developing and implementing the Torfaen Deal:
 - o Develop the Torfaen Deal following in depth stakeholder engagement and public consultation and engagement.
 - o Begin the process of organisational transformation through Rebel Culture.
 - o Establish relationships with the communities to deliver communications & engagement
- Provide training sessions in each directorate on Public Participation strategy and Children's Participation strategy by: Providing online training and reference materials which teams can use ahead of engaging the public and young people. This will be supported by workshops with directorates.
- Rebel BGT will align activity to BGT's strategic work programme. 'Rebel BGT' staff groups will be formed to address corporate challenges including suggested topics such as Investing in People, the use of AI and Sharing Power with communities.
- A communication campaign will inform stakeholders about the benefits of the work of Rebel BGT. This includes establishing a feedback mechanism to gather input from stakeholders about effectiveness and areas for improvement and by celebrating successes and learning from challenges.
- Rebel Youth – Ensure Rebel BGT incorporates the decision making of younger groups through Rebel Youth
 - 'Rebel Youth BGT' will aim to bring young people together to tackle the issues that young people face in both authorities.
- Work with service areas across the Council and local communities across the Council to identify and carry out research

7. A financially astute Council that...

- Has robust financial governance
- Successfully manages resources and seeks value for money
- Generates income where appropriate
- Maximises inward investment
- Invests in preventative services

Key Developments

We are a financially well governed organisation, and resources are generally well managed with good financial processes; sound budgets; good systems, alive to financial challenges which is positively viewed by our regulators.

Our most recent 'Financial Sustainability' study from Audit Wales concluded positively with no recommendations and overall conclusion that the *'Council has appropriate arrangements in place to support its financial sustainability and is focused on developing and implementing actions that will generate sufficient savings to address its identified budget funding gap in a timely and sustainable way'*.

We have an effective framework of financial accountability which can be demonstrated by our robust arrangements for financial control, through the Authority's accounting procedures and Financial Regulations. We ensure, through our Annual Governance Statement (AGS), that our Council's business is conducted, in accordance with the law and to proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently, and effectively.

The work of the Internal Audit team in delivering the annual audit plan ensures that an annual opinion on the governance systems operating within the council can be produced and reported to Governance & Audit Committee. The opinion is included in the Head of Internal Audit annual report which feeds into the Annual Governance Statement.

The Councils Counter Fraud arrangements were reviewed during the year by Audit Wales who concluded the Councils focus on strong governance and controls provides a sound foundation for preventing and detecting fraud but there is scope to strengthen some aspects of its arrangements.

Our arrangements include established capital and revenue budget planning procedures. Our Councillors are provided with regular financial reports comparing actual revenue and capital expenditure / income to annual budgets, whilst the Authority's Medium-Term Financial Plan outlines the financial forecasts and any levels of estimated shortfall.

We supported our financial processes by devolving responsibility to individuals within our organisation, making them totally responsible and accountable for their budgets and the financial processes (including adherence to corporate financial processes), which are used within the provision of the service. However, staff are supported by effective, well respected Finance Officers who are relied upon for expert advice and guidance.

'Project Apollo' continues to be our council-wide approach to addressing the shortfall in our medium-term financial plan, developed under 8 separate workstreams. The approach represents a far more strategic approach to delivering savings linked to our direction of travel i.e. the communities approach, early intervention and prevention and our new federated model, rather than the traditional model of cutting services to save money.

Our Portfolio Management Office (PMO) is working with teams across the Council to support the planning, initiation and delivery of strategic and larger scale programmes, projects, service improvements and transformation, ensuring we invest in the right things and deliver high quality services to maximise outcomes for the people and communities of Torfaen. We have a pipeline / project mandate process that has established a process for projects to be assessed and tested to provide assurances that each project will have the desired impact. The process therefore improves the way we are prioritising Capital investment and securing value for money from that spend. During the year we have sought to improve how we prioritise Capital investment by, linking the PMO's work programme to service planning and project mandates. This

has resulted in us establishing governance structures, ensuring projects and programmes align with corporate objectives and decisions are made in accordance with established policies and procedures.

We have added greater resilience and stability to our procurement function, as a result of our collaboration agreement with Cardiff City Council. During the year we have been working with Ardal (Cardiff Council procurement service), to deliver a Socially Responsible Procurement Policy that promotes the procurement of goods and services in accordance with the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2024, improving well-being through supporting the delivery of the aspirations in our County Plan. Although the Common policy across Ardal partners has been slightly delayed, implementation is expected by August 2025

Audit Wales have reviewed the Council's [arrangements for commissioning services](#) assessing whether we have in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources? Overall Audit Wales concluded that the lack of corporate commissioning arrangements has limited our ability to gain assurance we are securing value for money. Not having corporate commissioning arrangements has limited our assurance that all service areas consider key factors to help us consistently deliver value for money. A commissioning framework for Torfaen is under development and the recommendations from our Audit Wales review will be used to further improve our approach. We will take this forward as a priority into 2025/26, to ensure arrangements for commissioning services become more robust.

We remain strong at attracting inward investment, including successful bids for external funding, resulting in new grant funding that will bring investment into our communities.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent, we will,
 - Initiate financial modelling and resource strategies
- Review and implement revised capital programme management and governance arrangements, and embed processes for prioritisation of capital resources.
- Develop a strategy for balancing the medium-term financial position which sets out the actions required in individual years, via Project Apollo and specific service areas, to address the financial challenge.
- Regular forward monitor of school budgets to reduce risk of deficits and provide deficit recovery support, where required.
- Introduce a corporate approach to commissioning services, to enable the Council to assess the value for money of those services
- Implement the new national commissioning framework guidance to ensure that our commissioned services are demonstrating high quality outcomes and value for money.
- Socially Responsible Procurement: Work with Ardal (Cardiff Council procurement service), to deliver a Socially Responsible Procurement Policy that promotes the procurement of goods and services in accordance with the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2024, improving well-being through supporting the delivery of the aspirations in our County Plan.

8. A digital and data led Council that...

- Uses data to anticipate needs
- Builds digital profiles to better understand customer journeys
- Is always on – enabling residents to access a wide range of digital services
- Actively involves residents through digital inclusion and digital platforms

Key Developments

Although we have developed significantly in the past year, we are aware, that we have still have a great deal of work to do to achieve our ambition of being a digital and data led council. Our Digital and Data Team has led the development of our Digital First Customer Strategy. Our strategy is helping us on our journey to becoming digital and data-led and we now have a clear strategic vision. A critical part of delivering our Digital Strategy is ensuring our staff are able and equipped to get the most out of the digital tools available to them. This project has been a good test bed for our new Rebel Torfaen group with staff being asked to give their

input into the digital flooding programme. Staff feedback has led to the development of an innovation space for staff to pitch and consider ideas, and a review of our Customer App.

We have also taken forward the work to design and agree a digital skills programme to increase capabilities of our workforce targeting. The focus of this work is on, the skills all staff should have, the Minimum Viable Capabilities we need at an organisational and service area level in order to deliver digital transformation, and the skills our managers and leaders need to better understand digital possibilities and apply to business problems/opportunities. A working group of staff from HR, Organisational Development and Digital, Data and Technology representatives has been established to take this activity forward. Training material is being developed and will available through our online training platform (Thinqi).

Our Digital first Customer Strategy means we are focussed on increasing the proportion of transactions completed online, using customer feedback to drive further improvements. Over 300 online forms (76% of forms) are now available online with work ongoing to develop and improve the user experience (such as Bulky Waste bookings). The insight taken from customer satisfaction and effort surveys are used to inform priority areas for improvement going forward. This has include the revision and improvement of 23 of our Streetscene forms towards the end of 2024/25.

We are also taking forward the development of solutions to automate and streamline business processes contributing to increased productivity and improved outcomes for our customers. Positive progress is being made in relation to this activity with a number of projects underway or completed. For example use of Copilot to automate the taking of meeting minutes; automation of Welsh Language Translation requests; use of Gov.Notify to automate and streamline communication and engagement with course participants in Adult Community Learning; use of Microsoft Forms and Power Platform to automate the induction process for new starters in Waste and reduce administrative requirements. Copilot is now also being used to save significant amounts of time for social workers carrying out routine administration tasks, and the automated delivery of tasks to Streetscene officers which has removed manual tasks, printing and unnecessary travel to pick up job sheets.

Improvement Activities for 2025/26

- As part of the development of our federated model of working with Blaenau Gwent, we will,
 - Develop solutions for operating systems to enable Federation
- As part of our process of developing and implementing the Torfaen Deal, we will,
 - Begin digital and data infrastructure upgrades.
- Explore ways of taking staff and residents with us on our digital journey by: Understanding and assessing what technology is already available to us and what is required.
- Explore ways of taking staff and residents with us on our digital journey by: Working with our Staff Focus Group to ensure the right culture is in place to improve digitally and ensure the right training and engagement is provided to our staff.
- Identify gaps in our data by: Identify the data Directorates need to make evidence based decisions to through addressing the most significant challenges in each Directorate
- Designing and agreeing a digital skills programme to increase capabilities of our workforce targeting:
 - Skills all staff should have,
 - The Minimum Viable Capabilities we need at an organisational and service area level in order to deliver digital transformation, and
- Skills our managers and leaders need to better understand digital possibilities and apply to business problems/opportunities.
- Designing and agreeing a digital skills programme to increase capabilities of our workforce targeting:
 - Skills all staff should have,
 - The Minimum Viable Capabilities we need at an organisational and service area level in order to deliver digital transformation, and
- Skills our managers and leaders need to better understand digital possibilities and apply to business problems/opportunities.
- Use solutions available to us to automate and streamline business processes contributing to increased productivity and improved outcomes for our customers.
- Provide Customer Care insight re: areas of high demand to inform areas requiring service/process redesign and to prioritise delivery.

- Increase the number of Service Requests (SR's) raised in MCS directly by the customer (i.e. online self service)