

Mr Mayor

{Report Delivery}

The Local Government Finance Act 1992 determines that the Authority delivers its Budget Requirement and Council Tax setting to Welsh Government by 11th March 2022.

The Provisional Local Government Settlement for 2022/23 received on 21st December 2021 indicated a provisional settlement of +9.0% for Merthyr Tydfil. Yesterday's announcement of the Final Local Government Settlement confirmed this increase. The settlement enables the Council to accommodate unavoidable financial pressures in excess of £6 million with a further £1.9 million related to Homelessness Temporary Accommodation Costs to be financed through the Welsh Government's Hardship Fund. Furthermore, the identification of £1.4 million service efficiencies enables the Council Tax increase proposal to this Council to be reduced from the budgeted 3.55% to 1.0%.

Looking ahead, addressing the projected budget deficits over the medium term remains a significant challenge for the Council with the Council's financial sustainability being the responsibility of all elected members working closely with senior officers.

Finance

Revenues and Benefits have continued to work tirelessly over the last 12 months in ensuring the timely payment of Business Grants to grateful local businesses unable to trade during the pandemic. Since the beginning of the pandemic 5,628 awards of Business Grants and Business Rates Relief have been administered totalling nearly £38 million. In addition, self-isolation, social care, and winter fuel support payments have been administered in a timely, effective manner.

Accountancy and Insurance have ensured the Council has claimed £9 million of financial support from the Welsh Government's Covid-19 Hardship Fund relating to additional costs and loss of income. At the same time, the closure of accounts for 2020/21 was achieved under extremely challenging circumstances, whilst financial stewardship was maintained through effective budget monitoring.

The IT Section has continued to be instrumental during the pandemic in successfully enabling the Government's home working objective by sourcing essential IT equipment and by supporting home-based staff. This has contributed significantly to the accelerated implementation of the Council's agile working agenda in providing an effective alternative to the traditional office based working environment.

Education

The last year has continued to be challenging for schools and our children and young people. The impact of class closures and intermittent lockdowns has impacted considerably on the wellbeing of our children and young people and indeed the staff in our schools who have worked tirelessly to maintain face to face provision as much as possible.

Throughout the year cabinet members have engaged with young people through online teams meeting and this has been a fabulous opportunity for members to hear the views of young people and indeed be challenged quite rigorously on the work that we do.

The Spotlight on Education week in October was an excellent showcase of the work that schools and other settings undertake to support and develop the future generations of Merthyr Tydfil. From the animation of the Raising Aspirations Raising Standards Strategy to the alumni videos, the work shared by schools which they undertook despite the challenges of lockdown and the Question Time event hosted by our Youth Cabinet, this really was a celebration of education across the County Borough.

Opportunities for the development of Welsh Language across our schools have been in the news this year as well with PenyDre becoming the first secondary school across the Central South region to achieve the Gold Campus Cymraeg award for the work they undertake to promote the Welsh Language. Both PenyDre and indeed the department have had television coverage for their work promoting the language. The Afon Taf cluster schools took part in a transition event last Summer in conjunction with the Urdd and compered by children from Rhyd y Grug and the Urdd also supported youth service activities during the Summer of Fun Activities.

The Summer of Fun activities also saw third sector organisations across the County Borough benefit from Welsh Government funding to enhance the work they do supporting children and young people in a variety of activities to engage them in learning but also support their wellbeing. This work is continuing through funding provided for the Winter of Wellbeing.

Education remains a key priority for the Council and there are clear areas of strength within the work we do. There are, of course areas for development but through consistent team efforts at all levels we are making significant changes leading to improvement. It is this collaborative approach both within the department and across partners that will enable the school improvement agenda to be delivered effectively for the future generations of Merthyr Tydfil

Social Services

Budgets within social care can be unpredictable in the sense that the Children Looked After rate and adults requiring support for their care needs can both change in a short space of time. At present there is a growing demand for packages of care within adult services, for example. Safeguarding adults and children will always be a priority and these costs cannot be avoided. We will endeavour to support children, families and adults within the community and their own homes but in some cases, this is not possible.

Social Services departments have continued to face financial pressures and have been significantly supported with grants over the past 2 years. There is still pressure to make savings as part of the Council's need to make efficiencies. This is whilst still balancing the needs of our service users, ensuring that the services we provide are not adversely affected.

At the end of the financial year 2020/21 Social Services were in a positive position, and for the first time showed a significant underspend overall. This remains the position at the end of the financial year 2021/22. The underspend was due to receiving grants from Welsh Government, which offset some of our overspends in the budget lines where there were high demands in that area.

As stated above in social care we have benefited from financial support from Welsh Government, this has not only supported the Local Authority with additional costs associated with the pandemic but to ensure that the fragile social care system is supported via the hardship fund to make sure that we continue to have a care system for the future. Forecasting the ongoing financial impact of the pandemic remains an area of uncertainty. The hidden consequences of delays in health support and services not operating in the most optimum manner due to stay at home restrictions are yet to be fully understood. We have already seen an increase in demand within children and adult Mental Health Services, and the need for packages of care due to patients suffering long covid.

In respect of the grants received this year, these include:

- Hardship Fund.
- Recovery Grant.
- ICF and Transformation.
- Winter Pressures.
- Family Intervention Fund.

The Recovery grant alone was in the region of £1.4 million, and although there was a set criteria for this it has helped to alleviate major overspends in some areas.

The grant was to consider support to staff and providers (wellbeing), children services, and carers. A plan has been submitted to Welsh Government in line with the guidance and the grant has to be spent by 31st March 2022. The areas we are supporting include the following:

- Young carers.
- Parent advocacy (extending the service for a further six months).
- Development and scoping of support for carers to children with disabilities and unpaid carers.
- Wellbeing sessions for staff and team development across children and adult services to support staff resilience.
- Preventative services – therapies and packages of support to families.
- Family Group Conference.
- Additional Agency staff to support Covid recovery including Mental health social worker, support workers, Children Social workers and Community Occupational Therapist.
- Baby and you project – to add additional pre birth support to meet demand.
- Commissioning of parenting assessments.
- Develop digital stories to promote access to services and understanding of service provision.
- Third sector support.
- Review of fee cost analysis.
- PPE (regional service costs)
- Financial sustainability of the care sector (Residential care sector has been impacted upon and hardship fund diminishing though requirements remain.
- Additional and enhanced respite services.
- Service monitoring officer for six months.
- Children Services – residential costs.

The above is some of the pressure areas within the service and the financial support will assist the recovery within the next few months. It also gives us the opportunity to give teams additional support. The recovery grant has been welcomed and allows the service to be innovative and assist with current service delivery, whilst adding some additional support.

We continue to work regionally with neighbouring authorities and the health board on transformation of services, both in Adult and Children services. Although Integrated Care Fund (ICF) funding as it exists now will end in March 2022, there will be further regional funding under a new guise and there is a plan for up to five-year funding. There is currently work underway across the region to consider future innovations and the continuation of existing successful projects, for example stay well @ home.

As you were aware last year within Adult Services and Day Services, along with our partners in health board we were successful in securing a large capital investment from ICF to transform our older people's day services for people with dementia. An innovative dementia friendly design was agreed in collaboration with colleagues in the Health Board and Meaningful Care Matters that would provide a purpose-built specialist environment for our dementia day service users.

The project concluded at end of 2021 and is the first fully integrated Health and Social Care Day service in Wales to receive the butterfly accreditation in dementia care. Within recent weeks we received the Level 1 accreditation which is the first in the UK.

In respect of Capitol Funding we have also been successful in obtaining funding for the Neighbourhood Learning Centre. The council were awarded £1,126,174 funding from the Cwm Taf Morgannwg ICF Discretionary Capitol programme, which has identified work with young people and looked after children as a key priority. It will be transformed into an innovative training and accommodation centre for the county borough's young residents. We have also received capitol funding to carry out a feasibility assessment for a children residential establishment.

In summary we have had assistance this year with grant funding which has hugely benefitted us. The demands on our service remain high and we continue to endeavour to provide the right services at the right time. We are yet to know the full extent of the pandemic and how this will impact on future budgets. However, we are aware that there will be significant pressures within some service areas at present, for example, domiciliary care and this is an area that may require additional funding in future to consider contracted hours, the Real Living Wage (RLW) and extra demand within the system. There is a review underway in domiciliary care which could result in a 30% to 50% increase in cost. This will consider working hours and payment per hour as per RLW. This could have an impact of £1.5 million. We are also currently undertaking a review of care home fees and there could be an impact on future costs here.

Neighbourhood Services

Waste

This year has seen significant pressures within Waste services due to the pandemic, resulting in the need to work and respond in different ways to ensure staff and resident safety. We have seen a large increase in material presented due to residents working from home, however throughout this we have maintained a full collection service for the last 2 years.

Significant improvements have been made in Waste Management in relation to achieving the Welsh Government Recovery and Landfill diversion targets. In 2020/21, Merthyr Tydfil CBC exceeded the Welsh Government recovery target of 64% by attaining 67%. Progress has continued into 2021/22 with a provisional recovery rate of 67.49% achieved for the first three-quarters.

From March 2021 – December 2021 a total of 7945t of waste was collected at the HWRCs. Of this 6548t was re-used or recycled, giving a recovery rate of 82%. The remaining 1397t of residual waste was sent to energy from waste. Compactors were purchased for both the Dowlais and Aberfan sites which has greatly reduced the amount of haulage used, reducing our carbon emissions. Since July 2021 We have been separating litter bin waste on Dowlais HWRC in order to further increase our overall recycling performance.

With the continuation of initiatives such as “Keeping up with the Jones’s” and the opening of a reuse shop, Waste management are continuing to explore every opportunity to achieve the Welsh Government target for re-use, recycling and composting as well as landfill diversion. New initiatives include provision of Recycle on the Go bins to replace existing litterbins across the County Borough and an application for funding for the provision of a polystyrene compactor to recycle this material at the Dowlais HWRC.

Engineering & Highways

The Highways department successfully secured an additional £1.8 million from the Welsh Government Resilient Road Funding Grant to continue to upgrade the County Boroughs outdated highway drainage systems. A number of drainage schemes have been completed with works still ongoing. The gully machine has now been brought back in-house which enables a more responsive service for cleansing all adopted gullies and dealing with flooding issues within the County Borough.

Highways have carried out £1.2 million of routine maintenance works throughout the County Borough, £1 million worth of resurfacing and footway works, £574k on upgrading and replacing traffic lights, safety fences, disabled access drop kerbs, cattle grids, traffic signs and road lining. An additional £250k from Council reserves was invested to undertake highway repairs to reduce the extensive backlog of safety defects thereby reducing the risk of potential third party claims.

The Highways department also received £65k as part of the Welsh Government Digital Improvement Grant, which enabled three new weather stations to be installed at Bedlinog, Heolgerrig and Mountain Hare to provide more accurate information and forecasts for our winter maintenance service. This will ensure the winter maintenance service is operating more efficiently.

The Street Lighting Team continue to maintain the current stock of 7,500 streetlights and are in the process of upgrading the Council’s infrastructure by replacing 100 concrete columns to new aluminium columns.

Storm Dennis recovery schemes are still ongoing and will continue into next year to reduce the risk of flooding throughout the borough. To date £3 million of repair work has been carried out over 29 schemes. This work involves repairing and upgrading culverts, reinstatement of river embankments, installation of trash screens and flood monitors, increasing the capacity of watercourses, scour protection to road bridges and stabilisation work to landslip areas. A substantial flood defence scheme has been completed on the Plymouth feeder in Troedyrhiw and Pentrebach to prevent future flooding in these areas that were severely affected during storm Dennis where a number of properties were flooded. An additional £200k has been spent on further flood prevention work on existing watercourses and culverts in the borough.

A Welsh Government grant of £640k has been received to undertake maintenance work on 17 disused coal tips within Merthyr. This work will remove any potential risk of tip failures or landslips to ensure the public remain safe. In addition, all 131 disused coal tips and quarries have been inspected throughout Merthyr Tydfil.

A number of road Safety training programmes were provided to 15 out of 22 schools, to a record number of children this year. Kerbcraft was delivered to 323 children, Cycle Training Level 1 and 2 was delivered to 235 children and Learn to Ride was delivered to 813 children. Additional Welsh Government funding allowed the purchase of 20 bikes that will be used in schools to assist with the training programmes.

Following a number of serious accidents and alarming speed survey results on the A4054 between Troedyrhiw and Quakers Yard, Welsh Government have provided £280k to install average speed cameras to improve road safety in this area. Installation will be complete by March with 15 cameras being located between Troedyrhiw and Quakers Yard.

Street Scene

The parks department has continued to deliver quality green spaces despite the Covid Pandemic and has retained Green Flag status for Cyfarthfa Park, Taff Bargoed, Thomastown Park and also Aberfan cemetery. This year has seen the first significant spend on children's playgrounds in many years and a five-year plan of refurbishments has already begun with the first four new sites due to be completed by March/April this year.

The Ash Dieback disease which has blighted many thousands of trees throughout the country has been proactively managed under the council's Ash Dieback Plan. This has meant that many hundreds of dangerous and diseased trees have been made safe. Replanting programmes have also been initiated to replace trees lost by the disease and this will continue into the future.

The importance of biodiversity is now widely recognised, and the way greenspaces are maintained is changing. This will ensure we are fulfilling our obligations within the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Six large and ten smaller sites have been designated as wildflower areas and new equipment has been grant funded to ensure we manage these areas in a sustainable way. These sites will be monitored over future years to assess the benefits made to biodiversity.

The bereavement services section continues to provide a sensitive and professional service for our community's diverse needs. We have been working closely with the Probation Services to create a service level agreement and establish a permanent base for them at Cefn Cemetery. This has given us better access to this valuable resource, and we are already seeing positive feedback from users as a result of this partnership approach. A new Garden of rest has been completed in Pant cemetery and this facility is due to open in the spring.

Planning

In 2021/22 the department received the greatest number of applications in 8 years. 99.7% of all planning application were determined in the statutory 8-week period resulting in Merthyr Tydfil's continued success as being the best performing Welsh local planning authority in terms of this performance indicator. New electronic procedures and processes continue to be introduced to enable more efficient agile working.

The planning enforcement officers have also witnessed a substantial increase in the number of cases but have maintained a very efficient level of investigation and resolution of breaches of planning control.

Ultimately an efficient, effective and responsive planning department is an essential component in the delivery of improvements to the priority areas for the Council. With this in mind, examples of planning applications permitted over the last year include:

- Residential development of 45 dwellings - land to north of Crabtree Walk and to the west of Sweetwater Park, Trefechan.
- New building to accommodate 17 units of sheltered accommodation at Jah Jireh Care Home, Heads Of The Valleys Road.
- Residential development to provide 12 affordable housing units and a new play area at Gellideg, Swansea Road.
- Extension of Prince Charles Hospital to provide Medical Day Unit.
- Residential development of 23 affordable dwellings at Springfield Rise, Treharris.
- Major extension at Stephen & George Ltd.

2021/22 also saw the production of the first Annual Monitoring Report of the Replacement LDP, which indicated that the Plan is currently being implemented successfully with targets in relation to housing delivery and renewable energy being met.

Corporate Property Services

Corporate Property are in the process of implementing the new Corporate Asset Management Plan which sets out the Councils vision, where the property portfolio is aligned to corporate priorities and service requirements, and where appropriate investment is made in capital projects. It supports our commitment to ensure the property portfolio is efficiently maintained, is fit for purpose and meets health and safety requirements.

They're also leading on a number of exciting projects including the implementation of agile working, the acquisition of St Tydfil Shopping Centre and the disposal of various development sites.

Housing & Regeneration

EXTERNAL FUNDING & ACTIVE MERTHYR TEAM:

Redevelopment of Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre and Skate Park:

In late summer of 2021, it was agreed that the Council would lead on the redevelopment of Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre. The Council quickly commissioned a leading leisure sector development company (Alliance Leisure) in order to bring both the main and learner pools back into use whilst also redeveloping the splash pool and changing rooms. In addition, there will soon be a refocus of potentially bringing a newly

designed skate park closer to the leisure centre building and we are planning on working in partnership with users of the skate park in designing it.

Community Renewal Fund:

The External Funding Team led on UK Government's new Community Renewal Fund (CRF) which is seen as the pre-cursor to the widely anticipated Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). During the summer of 2021 officers from within the team supported four local organisations in accessing £1,920,768 of funding to pilot key initiatives around enterprise development, learning and decarbonisation works.

SETS Grant:

The External Funding Team launched a new grant in 2021 which focused on providing £250,000 of capital funding to social enterprises, sports clubs and tourism sector businesses. A total of x16 organisations / businesses were successfully funded. Successful projects varied from large infrastructure works such as road improvements and building works to smaller projects such as the implementation of a commercial electrical charging point. The Council will again re-launch this grant again in the new financial year.

Improvements in Sporting Infrastructure:

Over the year the department has been integral in supporting a number of organisations in redeveloping their sporting infrastructure. Officers have assisted the likes of Penydarren Boys & Girls Club in assessing nearly £600,000 to install a new 3G Pitch with floodlights and assisted Merthyr Town FC with the full replacement of their 3G pitch. In addition, the department works with our colleagues at Afon Taf High School in order to lay a new running track for students and the community to use all year round.

Financial Support for Sport & Leisure Activities:

The Active Merthyr Team has supported physical activity providers including sports clubs, social enterprises, freelancers, and private businesses to successfully apply for over £400,000 external investment. This important finance helped to protect the progression of sport and physical activity across the county borough and positively improved infrastructure borough wide. In addition, nearly £100,000 of additional external investment has also been secured to develop a range of community activity programmes to support residents in being more active during the pandemic as well as in the future.

Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Town Centre Masterplan Development

As part of the next stage of the Town Centre redevelopment, Merthyr Tydfil CBC worked with Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and the Valleys Taskforce to create an integrated masterplan. This will ensure that the new bus and rail investments create an integrated transport solution that will facilitate an exciting new phase of regeneration for Merthyr Tydfil town centre and its wider communities. The

plan will assist the Council to prioritise, organise and plan the town to make it more competitive, attractive, welcoming and safe. The plan has been approved by Full Council. Over £6.5m has been secured from the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns Programme to deliver key physical regeneration projects such as Howfields re-development, a housing scheme at St. Tydfil's Hospital Site, the acquisition on St. Tydfil's Shopping Centre and also development funding for the Theatre Royal and Jols. Future schemes include Merthyr General Hospital, the Synagogue, Glebeland Site (the former Bus Station Site) and the Merthyr Tydfil Railway Station.

Townscape Heritage Programme

The Townscape Heritage Programme is targeted towards the historic restoration of properties in Pontmorlais and is funded through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The programme has gained momentum with three buildings completed and a further two nearing completion. The scheme has had a significant impact on the heritage and built environment and the growth of the Town Centre.

Former YMCA Re-development

All funding has been secured for the re-development of the Former YMCA into 10 office spaces. The key funders are National Lottery Heritage Fund, WG Building for the Future Programme, WG Transforming Towns Programme and Merthyr Tydfil CBC. John Weavers Contractors LTD. has been appointed as the main contractor and the programme is due for completion in Summer 2023.

Cyfarthfa Heritage Area Valleys Regional Park

Linked to the Valleys Task Force, Welsh Government announced in 2018 that £7m was available for the development of 9 Discovery Gateway Sites across South East Wales. Cyfarthfa Park was identified as a key Discovery Gateway site and funding was secured for the re-development of the Canolfan into a café and improved community facility. The funding also included adjacent areas including the toilet / changing provision and re-surfacing of the play area. The Canolfan re-opened in September 21 and has had a positive impact on Cyfarthfa Park and has been a real benefit for its users. The splash pad re-development will be completed in March 22.

The Cyfarthfa Plan

World-renowned architects Ian Ritchie Architects were appointed to lead an international award-winning team of consultants to develop a masterplan to turn Merthyr Tydfil's Cyfarthfa Heritage Area into an industrial heritage centre of international significance. The team has created a 20-year plan for Cyfarthfa Castle and its 190-acre park – home to the Crawshays, the famous 19th century ironmasters – and an area west of the River Taff that includes historic furnaces. The plan was adopted by Full Council in November 2020 and key projects have been identified for development and delivery. A Special Purpose Vehicle has been created, The Cyfarthfa Foundation, to deliver the projects and the Foundation is working closely with MTCBC and Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust in relation to key developments.

New Merthyr Tydfil Bus Interchange

Work on the new facility was completed in early Spring 2021 and it opened its doors to the public and bus operation in June 2021. It has been very well received and is a modern, fit-for-purpose bus interchange for the 21st century. In recognition of its high standard, the Council has recently received three prestigious national awards – Client of the Year by the Chartered Institute of Building, the Sustainability award by Construction Excellence Wales and an award for Planning Excellence by the Royal Town Planning Institute. The old bus station site at Glebeland was demolished in December 2021 and future development on this area is currently being considered.”

Cardiff Capital Regional Transport Authority (CCRTA)

This Council continues to manage and facilitate two £multi-million scheme development and delivery programmes on behalf of the region. Metro Plus is a programme of major capital transportation schemes aligned to the current transformational project on the Core Valley Lines rail network, with local development focussed on both Merthyr Tydfil and Pentrebach Rail Stations. Also, the Welsh Government’s Ultra Low Emission Vehicle Transformation Fund is supporting the regional CCRTA programme on the introduction of ULEV charging infrastructure for taxis, buses and public use, as well as providing a “try-before-you-buy” ULEV taxi scheme and investment in electric bus fleets.

Enterprise

This year has seen the completion of the Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) programme. The programme has been successful in bringing empty or underutilised buildings back into beneficial use. An additional £365,000 was made available through this programme to deliver COVID recovery programmes. Following on from the success of the TRI Thematic scheme, the Transforming Towns Placemaking scheme has been rolled out into the Town Centres. To date 2 projects have been awarded with a third undergoing assessment.

COVID 19 Business Support – Welsh Government have rolled out a variety of grant programmes to aid business recovery throughout the pandemic. We have successfully delivered the following grant schemes:

- Start-Up Grant supported 45 businesses with £112,500
- Local Lockdown Discretionary Grant support 193 businesses with £363,000
- Business Restrictions Fund Discretionary supported 389 businesses with £778,000
- Discretionary Fund June – August 2021 supported 98 businesses with £270,000
- Freelancer Fund supported 34 Freelancer with a total of £145,000
- The most recent Emergency Business Fund Discretionary has supported 64 businesses so far with £66,000

Valleys Taskforce Welsh Government Grant - Welsh Government / Valleys Taskforce committed finances to support the Transforming Towns agenda and specifically to

support smaller town centres within the Valleys Taskforce boundary, with the recovery of Covid-19. As a result, we are currently supporting 66 business to a value of £844,000.

Housing

Since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak Housing and Homelessness services have seen an unprecedented increase in demand for services. Changes made to the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 as a result of the pandemic has resulted in all persons presenting as homeless being offered temporary accommodation, with a further duty to secure permanent accommodation thereafter.

This temporary change is likely to become permanent and therefore we are working to meet the increased need and future demand through strong collaborative working with our RSL partners, Welsh Government and all internal areas of the Council to put Housing at the forefront of conversations and increase affordable housing development at pace and scale of a broad range of affordable accommodation to meet our local need.

In light of the significant uplift in Social Housing Grant (SHG) at our disposal for this year and the coming years (£4.4 million up from £1.4 million last year), the Housing Strategy team will look outside of our traditional four partners in order to maximise our future development programme to the fullest.

Over the duration of the current SHG development programme which ends in 2023/24 a total of 170 new affordable homes will be delivered. The biggest development will provide 31 units at Bryniau Road, Pant and the former St Tydfils Hospital site in town ward, respectively.

Here are some of the developments below.

- Previous CAB Building, Town – demolished to make way for 8 units of affordable housing (5 x 1 bed flats, 1 x refurb flat, 2 x refurb flats)
- East Street, Dowlais – 10 units of accommodation (6 x 1 bed flats, 4 x 2 bed houses)
- Bryniau Rd, Pant – 31 units of accommodation (15 x 1 bed flats, 12 x 2 bed houses, 2 x 3 bed houses, 2 x 2 bed bungalows)
- St Tydfil's, Town - 31 units of accommodation (14 x 1 bed flat, 8 x 2 bed houses, 4 x 3 bed houses, 3 x 2 bed bungalows, 2 x 4 bed houses)
- Lansbury Road, Swansea Rd - 12 units of accommodation (8 x 1 bed flats, 2 x 2 bed houses, 2 x 2 bed bungalows)
- Greenwood Close, Twynrodyn – 7 units of accommodation (2 x 1 bed flats, 5 x 2 bed bungalows)
- Walnut Way, Gurnos - 4 units of accommodation (4 x 2/3 bed bungalows)
- Springfield Rise – 23 units of accommodation (10 x 1 bed flats, 4 x 2 bed flats, 7 x 2 bed houses, 2 x 3 bed houses)

In addition to the above schemes, we are working closely with our internal departments, Welsh Government and partner RSLs to unlock strategic sites with a view delivering a mixture of private, affordable and mixed tenure housing developments. Heartlands (Dowlais), Dragon Parc (Abercanaid) and Haydn Tce (Penydarren) are examples of this.

Furthermore, as part of our exit strategy to help create move on from temporary accommodation we secured just under £1 million of WG Covid 19 Phase 2. This funding has helped secure:

- (BeattiePassiv) Modular Homes managed by Merthyr Valley Homes. 2 units are to be sited at Glasier Rd in Twynyrodyn and 5 units will be sited at Honeysuckle Close, Gurnos. The Glasier Rd site should be completed by end of February and work on Honeysuckle Close is due to start this financial year.
- The redevelopment of a terraced house into 2 x 1 bed flats, in partnership with a local landlord. These will be ready for move in to at the beginning of March.
- £37,100 to set up a regional Mental Health & Substance Misuse Multi-Disciplinary Team at our hostels. So far, the project has resulted in some service users engaging with treatment plans for the first time and we are now seeing some service users stabilising their symptoms and behaviour enough to access mainstream mental health and substance misuse programmes. We have already had some excellent feedback and case studies from service users and Hostels.
- Renewing our Housing First Project in partnership with the Salvation, increasing no. of units from 8 to 12 from 2021 into 2022

Glynmil Gypsy/Traveller Site

In 2020, MTCBC signed a new 80-year lease for the 24 pitch Gypsy/Traveller site Glynmil located in the Plymouth Ward of Merthyr Tydfil South Cluster. The new lease transfers all site management responsibility to MTCBC.

Since the site lease was renewed, MTCBC have secured £500,000 to redevelop the amenity blocks, with a long-term vision and masterplan for the redevelopment of the whole site over the coming years to renew and redevelop the site.

Housing Support Grant

Our indicative funding for 2022-23 remains at £2,873,282.13. WG have confirmed the same level of funding for the next three years.

The spend plan for 2022/23 has been reconfigured to allow for the commissioning of new projects which have been identified as being a priority, following consultation with stakeholders, analysis of our needs data and of course, the new ways in which we must adapt our services to comply with Covid regulations. Increasing our supported accommodation provision will be the priority for 22-23.

Employability:

The Employability Team within Community Regeneration have been very busy this year continuing on supporting local people remotely but also making a start on supporting people back in community settings as the Covid restrictions start to ease. These have been challenging times, but the Employability Team have secured over 510 jobs for people since the pandemic started. The team are working closely to understand how the pandemic is affecting businesses and how it is affecting the unemployed claimant count. With this in mind MTCBC was successful in securing Kickstart Gateway Representative Status and successfully secured funding to create 95 jobs internally and with external businesses. During 2021 the Kickstart Scheme allowed us to employ 49 young people as part of the scheme and moving into 2022 a further 29 positions will be created and recruited for before the end of March 2022. This has allowed the local authority to contribute to reducing youth unemployment following the significant rise in youth unemployment since the pandemic started in March 2020.

Our Aspire Shared Apprenticeship programme is now in the fourth year of delivery and I am pleased to report that over 48 local people have secured apprenticeship opportunities in Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering. The local network of employers is engaging really well to provide unique opportunities for local people to develop careers in these sectors. This is only achievable with support from partners such as Merthyr Tydfil College and Tydfil Training Consortium who are integral to providing the learning pathway component of the apprenticeship.

The team continue to have strong links with Social Services too, and we continue to be fortunate enough to maintain the role of Employment Mentor and Support Worker to work closely with social services to support and develop a range of opportunities such as volunteering, traineeships and apprenticeships to more vulnerable groups that are currently being supported. This will allow the Employability Team to continue to play a role in Corporate Parenting.

The team are now looking forward to working with Future Valleys and maintaining strong links with future inward investors such as Morgan Sindall as new investments are made in Merthyr Tydfil. The team will focus on establishing key links to community benefit and social value clauses to maximise opportunities for local people to secure employment and also use key stakeholders and investors to inspire young people of the future.

2022 does bring some uncertainty to the Employability world with the closure of the European Structural Funds, which will have a dramatic impact on the level of support being offered by the Local authority and also other training providers operating within the town. However, we are working locally and regionally to scope and plan future provision pending further announcements from Welsh Government and UK Government over the coming months.

Public Protection

Our Public Protection Services have remained at the fore front of the Pandemic response. This has included specialist advice to care homes and educational settings along with front line enforcement of the measures brought in to control the virus.

Following a review of services Environmental Health will now lead on Fly Tipping enforcement with plans to integrate the service with our Public Protection partners such as CCTV, this will provide a whole Council approach to tackling this issue. Officers are also returning to routine Food Safety work as part of our Recovery Plan.

Human Resources

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council has a wealth of skills and experience across its most valuable resource: the workforce. Our employees work with partners to provide services that, first and foremost, meet the needs of our residents in delivering our well-being objectives and priorities.

HR have an integral role in delivering high quality services which can only be achieved through the hard work of all our staff who are a motivated, accountable and committed workforce. Whilst we are one of the smallest authorities, the expectations upon us are just the same.

The HR department has embraced digital transformation we have started along the path of employee self-service, there is huge potential here to become more agile, to modernise internally, be more efficient, and support communities better. Meeting the higher expectations of residents, communities and businesses means radically rethinking how our staff deliver services. This requires new organisational approaches to change that meet the specific requirements of each service user. In order to deliver the change that is needed, our people need to have the best tools possible made available to them.

Our organisational development team deliver people development and change services targeted at managers. We specialise in building capability, performance and positive behavioural change across our employees. We ensure that our managers and leaders are equipped with the skills and behaviours they need to deliver sustainable, high-quality services for our communities.

The Council has been offering apprenticeships for a number of years. These have been both to existing members of staff, whereby they are able to take up a qualification at the same time as their role, but also by recruiting new apprentices into the organisation to help with succession planning and training new people to become qualified in their specialist area.

A recruitment exercise took place between May and June 2021 for 5 'Corporate funded' apprentices and 2 additional apprentices in Parks and Building Control, these were funded by individual department budgets. This allowed us to exceed our target of 5 apprentices to 7 apprentices under the Healthy Organisation Plan. All apprentices began employment in September and took part in a Corporate Induction

programme. They have been enrolled onto an apprenticeship programme with either a college or training provider which will mentor and support them to achieve a qualification relevant to the role.

Despite all the changes facing our workforce in this challenging time, with many staff working from home, Occupational Health has supported staff. It has been recognised that many staff have been feeling anxious due to the extreme and continuing changes to their daily lives. Regular bulletins have been circulated offering advice and sharing links with other support services. Staff have been offered a range of wellbeing activities the team have developed workbooks and packs, with strategies, techniques and ideas which assist staff to manage their wellbeing and mindfulness.

The scope of work is broad and varied for the operational team, there is a drive to implement progressive HR policy and practice, we research, benchmark and review the approach of our organisations towards managing employee relations issues and find solutions to implement legislative requirements and national and local pay changes.

We provide payroll and pensions transactional services and advice for our staff and customers under service level agreements. The team has a wide range of knowledge and skills to follow employees through the life cycle of work. The team manage pension administration and benefits for the employer and ensure that our staff are paid on time and accurately each month.

The HR Administration Team continued to provide a high standard of support to our managers and headteachers. The team work closely with managers to attract and appoint the right candidates to vacancies. This includes advertising, selection, appointment and the processing of pre-employment checks as well as the issuing of contractual paperwork including all safeguarding checks.

The health and safety team are responsible for ensuring employee understand the responsibilities and comply with requirements of the Health & Safety at Work Act and related regulations and guidance. The team have been working with our headteachers and school governors monitor activities to ensure compliance with locally set policies and procedures. As custodians, there is a requirement for schools to formally monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the health and safety systems within the school, the team, have assisted with this requirement by providing audits of schools across the borough.

Policy and Improvement

We are continuing to work closely with areas from across the Council in responding to the pandemic and are continuing to transform our services to improve in meeting our well-being objectives. We continue to implement our 'Shwmaeronment' (a safe and encouraging environment where Welsh can be spoken at all levels by anyone) principle and promoting the Welsh Language. We have encouraged on-line learning to support this during the pandemic. Our Strategic Equality Plan is being implemented and is built into our working practices.

Supporting the Council's Recovery Transformation Plan (RTI)

Throughout the pandemic the Communications Team has continued to support the organisation in relation to the RTI plan. The communications strategy has been developed to ensure that all stakeholders understand the required areas of transformation and the progress made in each service area. The purpose of this plan will also be to ensure that stakeholders are bought into the plan.

Legal and Information Governance

Since the country first went into lockdown the legal department has operated almost entirely remotely with only one lawyer in Civic Centre full time and one member of the support team. We have continued to provide advice and representation to all departments, dealing with 'business as usual' as well as new and specific demands related to legislation that has been born of the pandemic.

We have developed remote working and meeting skills and made an enormous shift away from paper-based working. Some of the courts are requiring physical attendance by lawyers whilst others are remote, and Child Protection hearings have increased in frequency via remote access with all of the administration and facilitation of those hearings being transferred from the court system to the Local Authority. All of this has been managed within the team and is now accepted practice within the court system. However, the court service is now suggesting that physical attendance at court should resume and we will need to plan for that.

The Information Governance Team have continued to deal with enormous volumes of work connected with the security of data within the new remote access and agile working processes, all of which produce fresh risks to our data security. The team has continued to manage all of the new challenges as well as keeping on top of the more usual business of the Council. FOI requests continue at a very high rate as a result of people wanting to have information about how the Council is responding to changes in legislation and working practices, as well as having more time available to them to become curious about issues relating to how the Council functions generally. We have a work plan as part of the Governance Improvement element of the RTI plan and meet regularly to progress that plan.

The new configuration of the legal offices in the Civic Centre is nearly complete and we will need to settle into agile working practices that are suitable for the long-term future within or outside of those offices.

Communications and Engagement

The Council's Communications, Consultation and Cabinet Office continue to be at the forefront of keeping our residents and businesses informed and engaged during these unprecedented times.

This year the team has undertaken 27 public consultations, ranging from changes to service delivery to the views of our public on the location of a new school. We continue to engage with all our stakeholders to provide them with the opportunity to 'have their

say' and form part of decision-making process on new initiatives, projects and service delivery.

The team has produced three issues of Contact Newspaper, which is delivered to all households and helps keep our residents informed and engaged on what is happening across our County Borough.

Several large-scale PR campaigns have been delivered such as the Raising Aspirations, Raising Standards (Education), Be Mighty, Recycle (Waste), We Care Wales, (Social Services) and Cyfarthfa Heritage Plan (Regeneration) and Aspire (Regen). We have also kept the public informed on our partnership work to address key issues, such as fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour.

Throughout this past year we have continued to support key Welsh Government and Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board Covid-19 campaigns to keep our residents informed on guidelines and vaccination and testing procedures. A key part of this has also been promoting and signposting people to the relevant financial support available to them in order to recover from the pandemic.

As of February 2022, our combined social media following across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is almost 28,000 and we are continually looking at new strategies and platforms to increase this number. As of 1st February 2022, we have dedicated Welsh language profiles for each platform, where previously we had one bilingual profile, to streamline our messaging and make sure we are engaging with people in their preferred language.

We are continually working to make messaging simpler and more accessible, so we are using more visual content, such as short videos and infographics. We also aim to make our content more accessible by including subtitles on videos, simpler graphics and more plain language.

We are currently researching the potential to introduce an email subscription service for residents, where we will produce and distribute a monthly e-newsletter to those who choose to sign-up to the service.

On behalf of the Lord Lieutenant of Mid Glamorgan, we have also co-ordinated several royal visits and high-profile events across the region.

We understand the importance of keeping our employees informed and engaged, so regular updates are provided via our internal communication channels such as the Chief Executive's Blog, Staff Facebook page and staff intranet. We have also recently reintroduced our Staff Forum, with different subjects and representatives at each meeting. We are also looking at reintroducing a monthly staff newsletter.

Throughout all our work the team has supported the Council's Recovery Transformation Plan (RTI), working alongside officers to communicate key milestones within the transformation journey.

Our Communication and Engagement Strategy is currently under review and will go to Council in April 2022.

Democratic Services

The Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 brought in extensive changes, one of which was the requirement for Councils to enable people who are at different locations to attend the same meeting. The Democratic Services Department successfully obtained grant funding to purchase an IT hybrid meeting system and when this is fully installed it will enable us to return to the Council Chamber but facilitate the meetings but allow us to meet our legal obligations should someone not be able to.

In May 2021, Merthyr Tydfil found itself in the atypical position of running a combined election - not just in terms of covid restrictions, extensive legislative changes, and divergent franchises - but where the Senedd Constituency cut across two Police Authority areas and had to work with three regional returning officers. It was an extremely difficult but successful election and some of the new rules, such as votes for 16/17-year-olds and foreign nationals, will be introduced again for the first time in local elections, when we vote for our new Councillors in May this year.

The remainder of the year includes plans for the forthcoming election and the inevitable changes following the boundary review and subsequent Electoral Arrangements Order. Preparations are also underway for a programme of member induction and continuous development throughout the five-year term. Alongside this, there is a Business Improvement District (BID) Renewal Ballot in progress and Democratic Services was instructed as the ballot holder.

The team also worked closely with Comms colleagues to deliver campaigns to promote 16 – 17 years old and foreign nationals encouraged to vote in local elections, and the 'Diverse Democracy' project to encourage people from underrepresented groups to consider standing as candidates at next year's local elections and in future ones.

Registrars

The Registration Service has, like many other services within the Authority faced many challenges during the COVID pandemic. Operational processes had to be put in place due to the easements outlined in the Coronavirus Act 2020 to ensure the continuation of Birth and Death registrations during lockdown. In the current financial year up to and including January 2022, 896 deaths and 2,528 births were registered together with 95 marriage ceremonies.

Birth registrations are increasing year on year due to the large geographical area being covered by Prince Charles Hospital, i.e. Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent County Boroughs together with Bridgend and Swansea.

In addition, the registration service has also implemented the new Marriage Schedule System which modernised how marriages are registered for the first time since 1837. This moved away from the current paper register creating a more secure system and centralising the storage of all Merthyr's Civil and Religious Marriage Registers at the Merthyr Tydfil Register Office.

Also, new legislation was introduced in July 2021 for Merthyr Tydfil, along with all other Registration Services across England and Wales, to become a Designated Register Office for the purpose of carrying out legal notices of marriage for foreign nationals, utilising the EU Settle Status Scheme and Immigration Control when required.

Mayor's Office

Due to the pandemic no traditional events were able to take place during 2021.

Sadly, no major charity events were able to be arranged, but one was held in Bedlinog RFC for the Mayor's chosen charities which are '2 Wish Upon A Star' who offer immediate and ongoing bereavement support for families, individuals and professionals affected by the sudden and traumatic death of a child or young adult aged 25 or younger. '2 Wish Upon A Star' supported the family of Tom Smerdon who took his life in March 29019, aged 22, Suicide in the biggest cause of death in men under 45 and often there are no obvious warning signs that someone may be struggling. Tom's family set up the charity in his memory, #4Tom, to raise awareness around the issues of mental health in young adults and to prevent suicide, this work has become even more important following nearly 2 years of restrictions with more and more young people seeking help for their mental health.