

MERTHYR TYDFIL COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

LEADER'S STATE OF THE COUNCIL ADDRESS

20 March 2024

Mr Mayor,

The last 12 months have been challenging.

The funding from UK Government to Welsh Government to Local Government has, in real terms, been ever reducing.

But despite this, the Council continues to punch above its weight in all areas of governance for the people of Merthyr Tydfil.

I would now like to share some of the achievements that the local authority has delivered in the last year and end with some of the challenges that we will rise to meet in 24/25.

Finance

The accountancy team's sound financial management was maintained through effective budget monitoring throughout the financial year with timely reports to both Budget Board and Cabinet.

The hard work of officers across the organisation, the accountancy section and through wider scrutiny at Budget Board has enabled the Authority to achieve a projected net revenue underspend of £100k, a turnaround from a projected overspend of £1.1m at month 9.

The Authority once again received a clean bill of health from Audit Wales who issued an unqualified audit opinion on the 2022/23 financial statements.

The Revenues and Benefits sections have delivered on the numerous relief schemes introduced by UK/Welsh Government in an accurate and timely manner. This has ensured that the most vulnerable members of our community have had the assistance that they need and are entitled to.

This also extends to the many Business Rate relief schemes which have ensured the sustainability and continuity of many of our Merthyr businesses.

Council Tax and Business Rates collection rates remain consistent and are gradually returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Our ICT team leads on the Cymru Security Operations Centre project, on behalf of other Welsh public sector organisations.

The ICT Schools team has continued to deliver the Welsh Government's Hwb programme to our schools, providing nearly 1000 new devices to our classrooms this year.

Social Services

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, unfortunately, in some cases this is not possible.

We have worked closely with Welsh Government colleagues and regional partners around the 'Eliminate Profit' agenda to plan for future residential placements and to ensure that there are placements closer to home and at a more reasonable cost. We hope to see the benefit of this piece of work in the forthcoming years.

As you are aware, along with our partners in the health board, we were successful in securing a large capital investment to transform our older people's day services for people with dementia (Ty Enfys).

Having been successful in obtaining capital funding to transform the Learning Disability Day services at Kier Hardie, we have also obtained capital funding through the Regional Partnership Board to renovate the empty wing at Ty Gurnos to provide additional services for older people.

Corporate Comms 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.

This year the team has undertaken 30 public consultations, ranging from changes to service delivery to the views of our public on the Council's budget. 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 and we have recently reinstated our Citizens' Panel, the recruitment of which is ongoing.

In May we published our Participation Strategy, which sets out our approach to encouraging two-way communications and making the process of influencing decision making more accessible; and in July we published our Communications & Engagement Strategy, which explains the way in which the Council communicates with residents, partners, businesses and all our other key audiences.

This year the team has produced three issues of Contact Newspaper, which is delivered to every household in the county borough and is available digitally on the Council's website.

We continue to deliver key campaigns in-line with the corporate plan.

Our Communications and HR team understand the importance of keeping our employees informed and engaged, they have therefore produced six editions of the bi-monthly staff newsletter, The Message. This has been well-received by staff and goes from strength to strength, with the number of stories being submitted increasing with each edition and staff providing very positive feedback.

Legal

The legal team has continued to provide advice and representation to all departments, dealing with 'business as usual' as well as specific demands related to major projects and issues affecting the Council.

Some of the significant events and situations over the last year have required very high-level legal involvement to support the Council's response and solicitors have allocated their time to those issues.

The Information Governance Team has continued to deal with enormous volumes of work connected with the security of data within remote access and agile working processes, all of which produce fresh risks to our data security. The team has continued to manage this as well as keeping on top of the more day to day activities of the Council.

FOI requests continue at a very high rate which the team are managing.

A key element of the previous Recovery, Transformation and Improvement plan was the redrafting of the Constitution, and this has been completed.

Workshops have taken place with a group of Councillors over the course of the last year to familiarise them with the document and these are coming to an end with a view to the new Constitution being presented to Council for approval in April or May of this year.

Education

Estyn inspections have been positive across Merthyr Schools and education settings with three out of the four primary schools reviewed being asked to prepare case studies on their work.

Our Raising Aspirations Raising Standards strategy continues to be our driver for Education and will continue to support our ambitions for all our children and young people and their families to be given every opportunity to thrive and achieve their very best.

The Business and Education Together Partnership (BETP) has continued to be positive with an excellent conference at The College Merthyr Tydfil which

brought together businesses, schools, and local authority officers to take this important agenda forward.

The Education Department continues to work with partners such as Cardiff Metropolitan University to take forward the Community Focused Schools agenda and the work of the overarching Education Partnership Panel.

Welsh Medium Education is developing well with our new Welsh seedling school thriving!

A successful Welsh Language Conference in June, opened by the Education Minister saw partners from across the County Borough come together to consider the first year of the Welsh in the Education Strategic Plan and the Welsh Language Strategy.

Popular community events during the year to promote the Welsh language included Diwrnod Shwmae and our first Noson Lawen.

There are currently three school building projects being worked on:

The Pen y Dre refurbishment project is currently in year 2 of the 4 year programme at a cost of around £45 million. Phase 1 of the development was completed and handed back to the school in January. The project is the first major Net Zero refurbishment project of its size in Wales and has already won the Construction Excellent Net Zero awards at regional and National levels.

Work on the new 3-16 Blessed Carlo Acutis School started on site in January; this new £55 million school will merge all Catholic faith schools into a new state facility constructed to again Net Zero standards.

The new Goetre Primary School is currently in the planning stages and will provide a replacement to the existing primary school. Work is due to start later this year with completion anticipated by 2026.

Neighbourhood Services

The Council is committed to improving air quality in the community and to reducing dependence on fossil fuels by replacing our diesel vehicles with electric vehicles by 2035.

Successful funding bids to Cardiff Capital Region and Welsh Government, totalling £1.1m, enabled us to install a charging infrastructure in council properties. To date, we have replaced 16 vans and tippers and in the next two years we will replace around 50 more vehicles as they come to the end of their operation life and leases.

We are confident that most of our fleet will be electric by 2030 and we will reduce our CO2 emission by around 1 tonne per year and reduce our operational costs by around £300k per annum.

We would like to thank our residents who have again achieved the Welsh Government's waste recovery target for 2022/23, for the eighth consecutive year with 64.82% of our waste either recycled, composted, or re-used.

From April 2022 – March 2023 a total of 6,451 tonnes of waste was collected at the Household Recycling Centres, 84% of which was recycled. The remaining 16% of residual waste was sent to energy.

Waste management are continuing to explore every opportunity to achieve the Welsh Government target of 70% for re-use, recycling but we have a lot of work to do to achieve it, so residents are urged to continue to separate and present their recyclables for collection on the weekly kerbside recycling schemes, and ask for our support if needed.

The Highways & Street Lighting team have carried out over £1.9 million worth of routine maintenance and continued to deliver on its scheduled Capital works programme of £3.4 million.

They were also successful in securing an additional £400k from the Welsh Government to continue to upgrade our outdated highway drainage systems.

The Engineering department continue Storm Dennis recovery work and a total of £8million has been spent to date.

We have utilised nearly half a million pounds of WG funding to maintain and inspect disused coal tips to keep the public safe.

Long-term cemetery provision is being planned with land acquisition for Pant cemetery and its new garden of remembrance has been warmly received.

While enhancements at Cefn cemetery are nearing completion, Aberfan cemetery maintains its prestigious Green Flag Status.

The Council's initiative to refurbish children's playgrounds is progressing well, with 10 sites completed across the county borough in the last year. We're committed to this program, with plans to prioritise additional sites for refurbishment starting in April.

Our parks, including Cyfarthfa, Thomastown, and Taff Bargoed, continue to uphold their Green Flag Awards, highlighting their excellence in facilities and management.

In November 2023, our Biodiversity team were awarded the Pro Landscaper Community Green space award for their transformation of the disused tennis courts in Troedyrhiw Park.

The year has seen the planning department oversee approval of nearly 300 new homes to be built in Abercanaid, Swansea Road and around the Town Centre. These developments are in addition to the 120 currently being built by Persimmon in Twynyrodyn.

We have aspirations for further housing developments on the Heartlands site in Dowlais and the Hoover's site in Pentrebach.

Housing

As we all know there is an ever-growing demand for housing services and particularly temporary accommodation. This has significant impact on frontline staff, budgets and services.

The service is maximising all grant resources and opportunities to continue to work to reduce homelessness, broaden the range of accommodation in line with local need and deliver quality trauma-informed support.

An example of this is the redevelopment of the former Glan Yr Afon residential care home (Marsh House) into 32 units of Supported Accommodation with

plans to purchase a second large building for conversion to reduce the overreliance on B&Bs.

In December, in partnership with our Employability team, the new Town Centre Facility Hub opened with a view to engage the local community and to break down complex barriers regarding employment, housing and social services matters.

Also, a new Community Learning provision has been established called Compass Community Hub in Gurnos (formally known as Neighbourhood Learning Centre). This has and will continue to be a centre of community engagement to attract people to lifelong learning.

Both facilities have recently won national awards for their innovation.

Economy

The YMCA is nearly at the end of its second phase of regeneration and is now stabilised and completely watertight. It is now ready to be assessed for its future use.

The Foundation for Jewish Heritage has been successful in securing funding for our historic Synagogue and plans to turn it into a national centre for Jewish history continues.

The General Hospital has received planning permission which will see the old building transformed, offering much needed apartments to the Pontmorlais area.

We continue the regeneration of the town centre with the completion of the Howfields redevelopment into a boutique hotel and the Haystack café.

Work will begin shortly on Castle House in its change to a commercial unit at ground level with flats above. Also, soon to start is the renewal of 120, 121 and 143b high street which again will provide quality commercial and residential units.

Further significant developments proceed at varying stages of advancement.

Work has clearly begun on the Old Bus station site as it changes into a multi-function open space.

Plans are being devised for St Tydfil's Shopping centre, the lower high street Railway station, and an extension to the college footprint.

The overarching masterplan is being renewed with an eye on the future for town centres.

There are also developments of industrial units in the wider County Borough.

Paisley Park is close to completion on the Pant Industrial Estate while master planning is underway for the development of the former 'great white tip' site on the Goatmill road.

As we move into a new year we are faced with a number of legacy challenges.

After 300 years of coal mining in Merthyr Tydfil the last coal to be cut from a seam has been extracted and that page of our history has now been turned.

We are now working with our partners in Welsh Government, HSE, Coal Authority and the mining company to return the land at Ffos y Fran back to countryside in a safe and proper manner.

Lastly,

The Council is in the final stages of terminating the contract that has been in place with Wellbeing Merthyr (Merthyr Leisure Trust) since 2014.

The termination will see all of the council owned facilities that the organisation currently manage come back under local authority management including all libraries, Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre and Cyfarthfa Park.

Importantly, we are also negotiating with Wellbeing Merthyr to find alternative management models for both Aberfan Community Centre and the Redhouse.

And while we work toward a resolution for our residents, we continue with investments into facilities.

After a series of unforeseen issues in the final stages of the pool, work is now complete onsite, besides a small number of tweaks that need to be made and additional tests that need to be undertaken to safely open the pools.

In addition, plans are progressing well with the development of the new skate park on the leisure centre footprint which will see the 'park' situated closer to the actual leisure centre. Opening for both facilities will be released soon.