FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) Report

November 2025

Cymraeg

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
Gweler y dudalen Gymraeg ar ein gwefan.

This document is also available in Welsh.
See Welsh page on our website.

CYNGOR Sir y Fflint
Flintshire COUNTY COUNCIL

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 In accordance with the performance duties under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, Flintshire County Council (Cyngor Sir y Fflint) commissioned a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

1.2 The onsite assessment was completed over a four-day period concluding on 28th November 2025 with a feedback presentation provided to the Council outlining the key findings detailed within this report.

1.3 The assessment was undertaken based on the Council's agreed scoping document and the WLGA's PPA methodology, which was developed with the sector. The PPA methodology provides an overarching framework: the lines of enquiry are not prescriptive but provide guidance to the Panel on the areas that could be explored to meet the statutory duty. However, the extent to which the Panel explores those areas should be proportionate to the Council's scope but sufficient to enable the Panel to form a conclusion.

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

1.5 In preparing for the PPA, the Council scoped their requirements to maximise the value and impact of the assessment to the Council. The specific areas of focus identified by the Council are reflected in paragraph 3.2.

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

2. Peer Team

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

- Independent Chair: Phil Roberts, Former Chief Executive of Swansea Council.
- Senior Member Peer: Cllr Lis Burnett - Serving Councillor and Leader of the Vale of Glamorgan Council.
- Senior Officer Peer: Sarah King, Strategic Director Governance and Resources at Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.
- Wider Public, Private, or Voluntary Sector Peer: David Powell, Consultant, former section 151 officer at Powys and Herefordshire Councils, former interim Chief Executive at Powys County Council.

2.2 The Panel was supported by, Cerith Thomas, Senior Policy Officer (Improvement – Democratic Services) from the WLGA's Improvement Team and Dylan Owen, Senior Operational Manager for Policy and Improvement at Cardiff Council.

3. Scope and Approach

3.1 The Panel is required to assess the extent to which the Council:

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

3.2 The Council identified the following two areas where peer insight would be valued as part of the Panel assessment:

- **Workforce Planning and Working with Partners to Address Budget Pressures** - How well placed is the Council in workforce resilience and planning to ensure business continuity and sustainability.

- **Working with Partners to Address Budget Pressures** - How well placed is the Council in addressing demand led budget pressures, (specifically Social Services and Education), through partnership working.

3.3 To prepare for the onsite assessment, the Panel first conducted a desktop review of Council documentation, data, external reports, and other relevant intelligence. The Peers also participated in preliminary online meetings.

3.4 The Panel spent approximately 240 hours plus, during onsite stage of the review involving a series of individual meetings and focus groups with the following stakeholders:

- Leader of the Council
- Chief Executive Officer
- The Cabinet – Focus Group
- Deputy Leaders (Two Members)
- Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources
- Focus Group, Elected Members - non-executive
- Focus Group - Opposition Group Leaders (Flintshire People's Voice and Liberal Democrat)
- Chair and Vice Chair of Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- Vice Chair of Democratic Services Committee
- Independent Chair and Vice Chair of the Governance and Audit Committee
- Independent Chair and Vice Chair of the Standards Committee
- Chief Officer, Governance (Monitoring Officer)
- Chief Officer, Housing and Communities
- Chief Officer, Education and Youth
- Chief Officer Social Services
- Chief Officer Streetscene and Transportation
- Corporate Finance Manager (Section 151 Officer)
- Customer Contact Manager (Responsible for Customer Services, Complaints and Corporate Communications)
- Corporate Manager, People and Organisational Development
- Internal Audit, Performance and Risk Manager

- Head of Democratic Services
- Staff Focus Group - Heads of Service
- Staff Focus Group - Middle Managers
- Staff Focus Group – Frontline/Operational staff
- Headteachers - Focus Group
- Youth Council Representatives – Focus Group
- North Wales regional Local Authority Leaders – Focus Group
- North Wales regional Local Authority Chief Executives – Focus Group
- Chief of Staff and Integrated Health Community Director (East) Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board
- Town and Community Councils – Focus Group
- Trade Unions – Focus Group
- Business Community – Focus Group
- Director of Corporate Affairs Shotton Mill Ltd
- Public Affairs Manager Airbus Broughton
- Chief Officer Flintshire Local Voluntary Council
- Stakeholder Focus Group
- Citizens Panel Focus Group
- Chair of 50+ Action Group

4. Overall Conclusion

4.1 The Panel concluded that the Council is currently meeting its statutory performance requirements and that it is:

- Exercising its functions effectively;
- Using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively, and has
- Effective governance in place for securing the above.

4.2 This positive assessment is qualified by the fact that despite benefiting from a dedicated workforce and strong external partnerships, across the public, private and voluntary sectors, the Council faces significant risks regarding its medium-term financial sustainability.

4.3 The prevailing corporate narrative is one of external dependency, attributed almost exclusively to the Local Government Settlement. While severe funding pressures are acknowledged across the sector, the Council's reliance on this narrative is obscuring the need for urgent internal strategic transformation.

4.4 Although the Council is currently meeting its performance requirements, it faces critical risks regarding financial resilience, a transformation programme that requires urgent traction and impetus and a strained political culture that is disproportionally absorbing significant Member and Officer capacity particularly in terms of the scrutiny arrangements.

5. Local Context (Source: PPA Scoping Document)

5.1 Location and Place

Flintshire lies in North-East Wales, stretching along the Dee Estuary and the north-east coastline. It shares borders with Denbighshire to the west, Wrexham County Borough to the south, and Cheshire West and Cheshire in England to the east. The coastal strip along the Dee Estuary is heavily industrialised, while parts of the northern coastline have evolved into tourist destinations. The County's economic landscape is shaped by major industries, including aerospace manufacturing (Airbus), automotive engines (Toyota), paper production (Shotton Paper), steel processing (Corus), alongside agriculture and tourism.

5.2 Population and Demographics

As of 2021, Flintshire's population stood at 155,045, with 60.9% of residents of working age—comparable to Wales (61%) and slightly below Great Britain (62.9%). The median age has risen from 41 to 44 years, reflecting an ageing trend that surpasses the Welsh average of 42 years. Notably, the proportion of residents aged 65 and over has grown by 23.7% since the 2011 census, and this demographic shift is projected to continue through 2043.

5.3 Equalities and Welsh Language

Flintshire's population profile reflects limited ethnic diversity relative to national averages, with 97.6% of residents identifying as 'White,' compared to 93.8% nationally. Asian and mixed ethnic groups each account for 0.9% of the population. Welsh language use has declined, with speakers falling from 13.2% in 2011 to 11.6% in 2021—a reduction of approximately 1,900 speakers. The county currently hosts six Welsh-medium schools: five primary schools (879 pupils) and one secondary school (601 pupils).

5.4 National Identity

In 2021, 34.7% of residents identified as 'Welsh only,' down from 35.9% in 2011. Meanwhile, those identifying as 'British only' rose from 23.2% to 25.8%, and 'Welsh and British only' increased to 6.1%.

5.5 Disability

Around 19.1% of Flintshire's population is classified as disabled under the Equality Act, slightly below the Welsh average of 21.6%.

5.6 Employment

Flintshire demonstrates strong economic activity, with 80.9% of residents economically active compared to 75.1% across Wales. Employment rates stand at 78.6%, exceeding both Welsh and UK averages. Manufacturing remains a cornerstone of the local economy, accounting for 27.1% of jobs—approximately 19,000 positions out of 70,000 total employee roles.

5.7 Deprivation and Health

Despite overall affluence, pockets of severe deprivation persist, particularly in coastal communities such as Shotton, Flint, and Connah's Quay. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2025 places 4% of Flintshire's areas in the 10% most deprived in Wales, with education and community safety emerging as critical concerns. Health inequalities are stark, with life expectancy gaps of up to 11.6 years for men and 13.7 years for women between the most and least deprived areas. Vulnerability indices highlight Holywell, Sealand, and Shotton as high-risk localities, compounded by flood risks in several communities. In North Wales there is a disparity between total longevity and the period spent in good health. While women live longer than men on average (82 compared to 78), they experience a significantly larger "health gap", spending 21 years in poor health compared to 16 years for men. This is more pronounced in Flintshire. Although total life expectancy is slightly higher, the quality of those years is lower. Women in Flintshire face a 23.5-year gap between their total life expectancy of 82.5 and their healthy life expectancy of 59. Similarly, men in the area spend nearly 19 years in poor health. These figures highlight a critical regional challenge: while residents are living longer, a substantial portion of their lives, often two decades or more, is marked by illness or disability.

5.8 Housing

Owner-occupation dominates Flintshire's housing market at 71.7%, followed by affordable tenures (15%) and private rentals (13.3%). Property prices have surged significantly: lower quartile prices rose from £130,000 in 2020 to £145,000 in 2022, while upper quartile prices climbed from £235,000 to £265,000. Rental costs have also increased sharply, with four-bedroom homes seeing a 24.9% rise since 2020.

5.9 Social Rented Sector

Approximately 75% of social housing stock comprises general needs dwellings, with the remaining 25% designated for sheltered accommodation for residents aged 55 and over.

5.10 Infrastructure and Transportation Links

Flintshire benefits from strong transport connectivity. The A55 trunk road provides an essential east-west corridor linking North Wales to the UK motorway network, while the A494 connects to the M53, M56 and M6. Rail services operate via the North Wales Main Line and the Wrexham to Liverpool route, ensuring regional and national accessibility. The forthcoming Regional Transport Plan (2025–2030) is the responsibility of the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) and aims to address future transport challenges and support economic regeneration.

5.11 Local Climate Challenges

The Council's Climate Strategy (2022/23) sets an ambitious target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030. Investments in energy efficiency and renewable schemes underpin this commitment, with plans to scale up resilience measures and embed sustainability across all operations.

5.12 The Council

Flintshire County Council is currently run by a coalition administration (formed in October 2024). The administration is a coalition between the **Labour** group, the **Independent** group and the **Eagle** group (a grouping of independent Councillors). The Leader of the Council is Councillor Dave Hughes (Labour). There are two Deputy Leaders Councillor Richard Jones (Independent) and Councillor Paul Johnson (Labour). Cabinet portfolios are shared among 10 members from the coalition groups.

Table 1- Composition of the Council by political party/group

Party/Group	Number of Councillors
Labour	29
Independent (Total)*	27
Flintshire People's Voice	6
Liberal Democrats	3
Conservative	1
Non-Aligned	1
Total	67

*Breakdown of Independent Councillors:

- Independent Group – 11
- True Independent Group – 10
- Eagle Group – 5
- Unaffiliated Independent – 1

Table 2 - Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Chairs and political groups

Committee	Chair	Political Group
Community, Housing and Assets	Cllr Marion Bateman	True Independents
Corporate Resources	Cllr Bill Crease	Independent Group
Education, Youth and Culture	Cllr Teresa Carberry	Labour
Environment and Economy	Cllr Dave Evans	Labour
Social and Health Care	Cllr Sam Swash	Flintshire People's Voice

5.13 The Chief Officer Team/Senior Leaders

5.13.1 The Chief Executive, Neal Cockerton, is supported by a team of Chief Officers and Senior Leaders, who head up major service directorates:

- Chief Officer – Governance and Monitoring Officer
- Chief Officer - Social Services
- Chief Officer - Education and Youth Services

- Chief Officer - Housing and Communities
- Chief Officer - Streetscene and Transportation
- Chief Officer - Place and Growth
- Corporate Finance Manager - Section 151 Officer
- Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development
- Capital Programmes and Assets Manager

6. Strengths and Areas of Innovation

6.1 The Panel were impressed with several positive aspects associated with strengths and innovation, the success of which is fundamentally underpinned by the commitment and high calibre of the staff. Further details in support of this conclusion are set out in the following paragraphs (6.2 – 6.5.1).

6.2 Commitment and Dedication of Staff

The commitment and dedication of staff, across service areas and at all levels, was a feature of Flintshire Council. The organisation clearly benefits from the discretionary effort of staff, and the contribution of individual officers was recognised by the Council's partners and stakeholders.

6.3 Heads of Service Cadre

Committed, collegiate, innovative and caring group of senior officers who embody, in the main, the One Council approach. Focus groups and meetings with individual Chief Officers and Heads of Service have been open, welcoming and effective. This group is probably one of the Council's biggest assets at this current time and they should be nurtured and developed.

6.4 Service Innovation and Reform

6.4.1 There were examples of service innovation, across services areas, which provide a basis for the development of a Transformation Programme. Some service managers also articulated clear proposals for service reform, which would help improved service delivery and support financial resilience. These represent important building blocks for the transformation programme.

6.4.2 Aligned to the development of the Transformation Programme, there is an opportunity to develop an organisational narrative which recognises the examples of innovation, good practice and the commitment of staff whilst setting out a clear roadmap for achieving financial resilience and service sustainability. This represents an important component of maintaining staff morale, creating a real sense of agency in the face of strong headwinds and harnessing the commitment and dedication of staff.

6.5 Place Based and Service Delivery is Ambitious

The Council has a well-developed economic development narrative which is widely understood and supported by staff, elected members and partners. However, the Council has an opportunity to develop a similar narrative around the delivery of statutory and highly valued services.

7. Local and National Challenges

7.1 Financial Overview

7.1.1 Flintshire County Council, like all local authorities in Wales, is facing significant challenges to its financial sustainability.

7.1.2 In 2024/25, the Council achieved a breakeven position, supported by one-off national funding from Welsh Government and a modest draw of £0.296 million from its budget risk reserve—representing a variance of just 0.1%. This outcome was achieved through stringent in-year cost control measures, including vacancy management, a moratorium on non-essential expenditure, and maximising grant income.

7.1.3 For 2025/26, the financial picture became more acute, with the Council confronting a budget gap of £23.18 million. This was driven primarily by sustained demand pressures in social care, homelessness, and transport inflation. A balanced budget was secured through a combination of measures: a 9.5% Council Tax increase generating £11.09 million (including contributions to regional services), portfolio cost reductions of £3.30 million, a £2.93 million contribution from schools' delegated budgets, and further adjustments through reserve use, DEFRA funding for extended producer responsibility for packaging waste, and revised pressure estimates.

7.1.4 Despite these efforts, the underlying risks remain significant. Social care funding rose by 12% (£11.2 million) to support pay awards, provider fees, and market stability, yet high-risk areas persist—particularly adult and children's services, out-of-county placements, and homelessness costs. At Month 5 of 2025/26, the Council projected an overspend of £5.37 million, reduced to £2.66 million after applying reserves. The Contingency Reserve now stands at just £2.07 million, leaving total unearmarked reserves at £11.06 million—only 2.8% of the net budget, a comparatively low buffer against ongoing volatility.

7.1.5 Looking ahead, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy forecasts an additional requirement of £27.45 million for 2026/27. Officers have warned that very few options for further large-scale cost reductions remain, and the current approach lacks a longer-term roadmap to ensure financial stability. Capital investment for 2025/26 totals £91.3 million across Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account programmes, but delivery rates suggest potential slippage, adding further pressure to affordability.

7.1.6 Schools in Flintshire are facing significant financial challenges. Although the delegated schools' budget has been relatively protected with a net uplift of £3.995 million in 2024/25, the Council required a contribution to address its overall budget gap. Overall cost pressures of £12.281 million were identified, and despite initial proposals to avoid reductions, a 2.5% cut to schools' delegated budgets was implemented, contributing £2.932 million. This resulted in a net uplift of £6.950 million (5.92%). However, deficits are increasing, particularly in secondary schools, where 7 out of 11 (64%) are in deficit. The financial stability of schools is a matter the council must factor into its strategic planning.

7.1.7 Audit Wales (2024) assessed the Council's financial sustainability to be at serious risk, citing short-term planning, unplanned savings rounds, insufficient strategic transformation, and low reserves. The report recommended developing a more strategic, evidence-based savings framework, evaluating impacts on service users, and accelerating transformation delivery.

7.1.8 Overall, Flintshire demonstrates commendable short-term financial control but faces significant structural risks from social care demand, homelessness, schools funding and deficits with a view to ensuring sustainable funding and a limited reserves base. Sustained transformation, earlier savings planning, and strengthened member oversight are critical to restoring long-term financial resilience.

7.2 Financial Performance – Against its 2024/25 Budget

7.2.1 Against its 2024/25 budget, Flintshire County Council delivered a position that was broadly stable, with only a minor operating deficit of £0.296 million, representing just 0.1% of the approved budget. This variance was mitigated by drawing on the budget risk reserve, reducing the position to breakeven. The outcome was below the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) Key Performance Indicator of 0.5%, reflecting strong in-year financial discipline.

7.2.2 To achieve this, the Council implemented a series of stringent measures, including a moratorium on non-essential expenditure and a vacancy management process, both of which continue into 2025/26. These actions were complemented by maximising income streams and securing grant funding, demonstrating the organisation's ability to respond effectively to short-term pressures.

7.2.3 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) also maintained a break-even position, with net expenditure matching the budget. The final closing HRA balance as at 31 March 2025 stood at £3.043 million, providing a modest but important safeguard for housing-related commitments.

7.3 Medium Term Financial Strategy

7.3.1 The Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) sets out the financial outlook and planning assumptions for the coming years. In September 2025, Cabinet considered projections indicating an additional budget requirement of £27.45 million for 2026/27. This figure reflects anticipated pressures from public sector pay, service demand, and inflation, alongside ongoing risks that could further increase the requirement. After applying assumptions about a 2% Aggregate External Finance (AEF) uplift and a 5% Council Tax increase, the paper noted the gap reduced to £15.45m. However, after the PPA visit, there was an announcement of a potential 4% floor under the arrangement for the Welsh Government's draft budget. Given the original 2% AEF assumption, this should close the gap by a further £5.5m. Even so, this does not remove the urgent need to develop an effective transformation programme to support financial resilience.

7.3.2 Portfolio Management Teams review their financial position and associated risks monthly, ensuring alignment with the MTFS. Member engagement has been strengthened through regular budget briefings, aimed at improving understanding of the financial context and the scale of the challenge.

7.3.3 Despite these efforts, the MTFS remains too focused on short-term planning, with limited emphasis on a longer-term horizon. Reports to members have repeatedly highlighted the severity of the budget challenge and the diminishing scope for further large-scale cost reductions, given the historic efficiencies already achieved. The Council has maintained a principle of avoiding reductions that would compromise statutory duties or service safety, but this approach is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

7.3.4 Recent announcements about the 2026/27 Welsh Government draft budget should now be factored into the financial planning process and an adjusted 3-year gap produced to bring clarity to the overall financial position to support the alignment of an emerging transformation programme and Flintshire's financial resilience. The Council must also demonstrate it has addressed the concerns raised by Audit Wales that the MTFS is largely geared toward setting the next year's budget rather than providing a strategic roadmap for sustainability. Without a shift toward longer-term, policy-led financial planning, the Council risks continued reliance on reactive measures and short-term fixes.

7.4 Financial Overview – Conclusions

7.4.1 The conclusions set out below draw together the key points from an independent financial overview of the Council's position alongside the wider local and national challenges identified during this assessment. While Flintshire has demonstrated commendable short-term financial control, the evidence highlights significant structural risks that threaten sustainability beyond the immediate horizon. These include an over-reliance on one-off funding and reserves, escalating demand pressures in social care and homelessness, and a comparatively low reserves base. Combined with workforce capacity issues, governance strains, and the absence of a fully implemented transformation programme, these factors place the Council at a critical juncture. Without decisive and strategic intervention, the organisation risks moving from managed stability to systemic vulnerability.

7.4.2 **Sustainability Risks**

The Council's current approach relies heavily on non-recurring income and reserves, a position that is unsustainable beyond 2025/26. Unearmarked reserves stand at just 2.8% of the net budget, among the lowest in Wales, leaving the organisation exposed to major financial shocks. This limited buffer heightens the urgency for a more robust medium-term financial strategy and a clear risk-based approach to strengthening the reserves position.

7.4.3 **Service Pressures**

Demand growth in Social Services—particularly adult and children's care—continues to exceed budget assumptions despite additional investment. Homelessness and inflationary pressures in waste, highways and transport compound these challenges, creating structural drivers of overspend that cannot be addressed through incremental savings alone.

7.4.4 **Partnership Working**

The strong partnership between the six councils should serve as the foundation for a unified approach to health and social care funding, enabling coordinated engagement with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for more sustainable and consistent funding arrangements.

7.4.5 **Medium-Term Financial Challenge**

The projected additional budget requirement of £27.45 million for 2026/27 represents a significant gap that cannot be bridged by traditional cost-reduction measures. Opportunities for efficiency savings are largely exhausted, making transformation and service redesign essential to achieving financial sustainability.

7.4.6 **Governance and Oversight**

Audit Wales has highlighted weaknesses in long-term financial planning and limited evidence of scrutiny impact. While financial reporting is detailed, it remains focused on operational rather than strategic issues. Member engagement has improved, but difficult decisions on service models, priorities, and potential decommissioning have been delayed, further constraining progress.

7.4.7 **Capital and Investment**

The Council's £91 million capital programme is ambitious but relies on constrained borrowing and limited capital receipts. Delivery rates suggest potential slippage, and affordability risks will increase if borrowing costs rise, adding further pressure to the financial position.

7.4.8 **Summary**

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for urgent, strategic action. Flintshire must accelerate the development of a fully scoped transformation programme, strengthen governance and scrutiny arrangements, and adopt a longer-term financial planning approach that aligns with service redesign and workforce resilience. Without these measures, the Council's ability to deliver statutory services and maintain public confidence will be at significant risk.

8. Overview of Findings

Local areas, as identified by the Council, where peer insight would be valued as part of the Panel assessment. The two additional areas of local focus are:

8.1 Workforce Planning and Working with Partners to Address Budget Pressures - How well placed is the Council in workforce resilience and planning to ensure business continuity and sustainability and

8.2 Working with Partners to Address Budget Pressures - How well placed is the Council in addressing demand led budget pressures, (specifically Social Services and Education), through partnership working.

8.3 Observations and Enabling Factors

The Panel's observations on the two additional areas of focus requested by the Council have been integrated into this section. This reflects the substantial overlap identified not only between these two supplementary areas but also with the three core statutory themes. As the on-site phase was necessarily limited, the findings presented here are maintained at a strategic level, ensuring the feedback remains concise and helpful to the Council. These observations should be read in conjunction with the Panel's recommendations set out in section 9 along with the other comments included in this report.

8.4 Workforce planning

The advent of the flatter, leaner structure combined with successive years of financial efficiencies has led to little or no capacity in some areas. A lack of resilience within teams and lots of Single Points of Failure are having a negative impact on staff recruitment and retention and overall morale and wellbeing. These pressures are compounded by limited strategic capacity within the senior officer structure, which constrains the organisation's ability to drive transformation and respond effectively to emerging challenges. There is a clear need to appoint a dedicated transformation lead at senior officer level to provide the strategic focus and capacity required to deliver the Council's transformation programme at pace. The suggested Pay Model implementation should help to substantially mitigate the workforce issues, including the ability to put in place effective succession planning.

8.5 Enabling Systems

As part of the development of the Transformation Programme, the Council should consider the appropriateness of its enabling systems (e.g. Overtime, additional payments etc.) to support service delivery and the effective transaction of core business.

8.6 Consultation

The Council's consultation process can make better use of some of the groups in Flintshire. Those groups are keen to be included. There are key benefits for Flintshire around policy development, and service transformation. They apply to statutory consultations (e.g. budget proposals, service redesign), engagement exercises, and co-production approaches.

8.7 Communications, Consultation and Engagement

8.7.1 The Council should focus on improving its internal and external communication with staff, residents and stakeholders. This could help to manage the Council's reputation and mitigate some of the negative impacts currently being experienced via social media channels and also allow successes and innovation to be celebrated. The Council should increase its propensity to consult and engage staff, residents and key stakeholders in a meaningful way on service changes and policy development.

8.7.2 The effectiveness of internal communication is mixed leading to the potential for strategic misalignment as teams pursue siloed objectives, leading to duplication or conflicting priorities.

8.8 Town and Community Councils

The refresh and relaunch of the Charter between the Council and Town and Community Councils will help build a stronger relationship and the reinstatement of more regular engagement and information sharing will help service design and partnership working.

8.9 Commercialisation

A more business-like approach to delivering services and managing Council assets is appropriate to generate income, improve efficiency, or reduce reliance on core funding. It does not mean abandoning public service principles but rather using commercial thinking to support financial sustainability and innovation.

8.10 Procurement

The current joint arrangement with Denbighshire is limited in terms of resource and the Council should bring clarity to how the function supports its strategic goals. It also needs to be clearer about how this adds value and support its corporate savings.

Statutory performance requirements considered by the Panel.

8.11 The extent to which the Council is exercising its functions effectively

8.11.1 The Council operates under a fundamentally sound governance framework, however the effectiveness of the delivery of its functions is currently under strain. Operational risks, driven by workforce pressures, a challenging financial outlook, the absence of a Transformation Programme and increasing demands for services are impacting on the Council’s ability to maintain performance levels. The current senior officer structure does not, in our view, support the effective exercise of functions going forward.

8.11.2 There is a need to shift from maintaining processes to rigorously monitoring performance outcomes and workforce capacity. There was evidence that the organisation has strengthened its performance management arrangements at the corporate level, but this must be extended to Service Area level and supported by a strong performance management culture across the whole organisation. This should involve the development of service delivery plans and a commitment to timely performance management updates to help ensure the effective delivery of organisational priorities. The current gap between the Council's five-year corporate plan and detailed performance monitoring is hampering its ability to plan effectively and to maintain a clear understanding of how well it is performing. Addressing this disconnect will be critical to ensuring strategic alignment, enabling timely interventions and supporting the delivery of organisational priorities.

8.12 The extent to which the Council is using its resources economically, efficiently, and effectively.

8.12.1 As indicated in section 7, overall, the Council has demonstrated short-term financial control but faces significant challenges going forward.

8.12.2 A longer term MTFP aligned to the Transformation Plan will help support financial resilience and the delivery of the Corporate Plan. It will enable financial sustainability, identify future budget gaps and cost pressures early. It will also reduce reliance on reserves and an annual reactive budget balancing process. Furthermore, it allows phasing of savings and income plans. There would be clear benefits with policy-led budgeting rather than short-term fixes. It also provides time to deliver transformation programmes effectively and strengthens links between financial planning and workforce, digital, estate and service redesign.

8.12.3 The 2024 Audit Wales review had a clear recommendation about that the Council should address a weakness around the identification of savings. This included identifying the impact of savings on services and service users. It is important the Council can demonstrate it has adjusted its approach in response to the report.

8.13 The extent to which the Council has effective Governance in place.

8.13.1 The Council's governance arrangements are fundamentally effective and this is evidenced by external regulator reports and other key pre-read material considered by the Panel such as the annual governance statements for the previous 3 years. The Council's self-assessment indicates compliance with key principles such as integrity and openness with the majority of governance indicators. We also explored these arrangements through our discussions as part of the onsite interviews.

8.13.2 However the effectiveness of these arrangements is tested by significant operational risks, specifically workforce resilience, performance monitoring in key sectors such as planning, digital transformation and the wider transformation programme, tensions within the political culture particularly around the Scrutiny arrangements and medium-term financial planning.

8.13.3 The effectiveness of Scrutiny could be enhanced by fostering non-political, evidence-based scrutiny arrangements that prioritise constructive solutions and strong stakeholder relationships. Operational efficiency should also be improved by removing 'reports for noting' from agendas and resolving minor service matters through direct contact rather than a formal committee process to avoid delay. Scrutiny papers should be more concise, the Panel heard of some papers being over 500+ pages and lengthy Scrutiny Committees, more than 7 hours in one instance, despite an initial allocation of 2 hours. Additionally, there is a need for greater evidence demonstrating the impact of outcomes of the scrutiny process. The Panel had scheduled a session with the chairs of scrutiny but no chairs attended. The panel were advised that two of the chairs were absent due to illness. The panel remains confident that the recommendations about scrutiny are based on robust and triangulated evidence.

8.13.4 The ongoing review of the Council's constitution is expected to strengthen the application of scrutiny arrangements and resolve some of the issues currently affecting their effectiveness in terms of roles, relationships and behaviours . The Panel considers this a positive measure, and improving the effectiveness of scrutiny committees would be a key outcome.

8.13.5 Work is underway to scope out a development programme for members and senior officers which is much needed, this should be categorised into mandatory, desirable and general training elements to enable all councillors to carry out their roles in a safe and compliant way in advance of work starting on the induction programme for 2027 in conjunction with the WLGA. The improvement work on roles, relationships and behaviours amongst elected members and senior officers which has been supported by the WLGA needs to be progressed apace. The Panel understand that a working group has been set up to progress this work. It is important that progress is closely monitored at the most senior level and that agreed protocols are properly adhered to.

9. Opportunities for Improvement – Recommendations

9.1 We have carefully considered the three required performance areas and the additional two areas identified by the Council for local consideration as part of the assessment process. This report contains a number of observations and comments about the Council's performance in each of these areas. They should be considered along with the recommendations set out below.

9.2 Overall, the Panel has concluded that Flintshire is a Council that has delivered on its performance requirements in the short term. However, without effective Transformational change, there is a significant risk to its sustainability in the medium to long term. In order to mitigate these risks, we recommend the Council should implement the following recommendations:

9.3 **Table 3 - Summary of recommendations**

1.	The Council should undertake a comprehensive review of the scrutiny process to include the management and co-ordination of the scrutiny programme, the training and development of chairs and scrutiny members and the reinforcement of the proper purpose and function of scrutiny.
2.	The Council needs a fully scoped, resourced and targeted Transformation Plan with clear accountabilities within a corporately agreed work programme. Including a focus on commercialism, prevention and the digital strategy with alignment to medium term financial planning. This is essential if the Council is to achieve financial sustainability in the medium term and needs to be completed as a matter of urgency. Both the transformation programme and the WLGA leadership work, referred to in recommendation 3 below, require a clearly defined action plan, supported by appropriate resourcing and robust governance arrangements. Clear ownership and accountability should be established at senior officer level. While a political lead for transformation is in place and the need for additional senior management capacity has been identified, both programmes are currently assigned to the Head of Governance, who already has significant responsibilities. To ensure effective delivery, a dedicated senior management lead should be appointed.
3.	The Council should progress and accelerate the work by WLGA on roles, relationships and behaviours. This will require an agreed plan of work to deliver the recommendations made by the WLGA. The Panel is aware that a working group has been set up to take this task forward. The Council will need to rapidly implement, monitor and revisit progress on this essential work.
4.	The Council should build on the achievements and positive relationships with its regional Local Authority partners in addition to continuing the excellent work on regional economic development. Attention should now focus on a collective approach to the issues relating to health and social care and the relationship with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.
5.	The Council should look to strengthen its strategic management capacity by revisiting the senior management structure that has been in place for over a decade.
6.	The Council should consider in detail the position on schools funding and deficits. This must ensure sustainable funding for this core statutory service. The acceleration and delivery of the school modernisation programme will ensure the school estate is economic, efficient and focussed on improving standards and educational attainment.

10. Improvement Support

If you would like to discuss any further improvement support, please contact Jo Hendy, WLGA Head of Improvement.

11. Acknowledgements

The Panel and the WLGA would like to extend their thanks to the Council for its engagement throughout the PPA and we especially appreciate the support and openness from the Leader, Councillor Dave Hughes and Chief Executive, Neal Cockerton. Our thanks and appreciation also go to Lisa Brownbill. Internal Audit, Performance and Risk Manager and the Performance and Risk Management Team for their invaluable support in coordinating documentation requests, responding to queries, arranging meetings and workshops, and providing onsite assistance:

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