

MERTHYR TYDFIL COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

SCOPING REVIEW

Key Challenges, Leadership Capacity and Capability, Governance and Strategy

**John Gilbert
External Advisor
Welsh Government**

September 2019

1. Strategic Overview and Background.

Following a request from the Leader of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council to the Minister for Housing and Local Government, a package of support was agreed to be provided under section 28 of the Local Government (Wales) 2009 to help address the specific and current challenges.

The first phase of this work included an initial scoping review. This is designed to provide the Minister and the Council with a rigorous, independent assessment of the Council's key challenges and necessary actions required in order to make the necessary changes required.

Overall the scoping review will more specifically look at:-

- Providing an assessment of the Council's capacity to meet its short and longer term objectives and where it may need additional expertise and/or support;
- An analysis of the Council's organisational development capability to sustain improvement and
- To consider the Council's governance and scrutiny arrangements

Furthermore, the review is to provide an initial external assessment of the Council's:-

- Work streams – in particular the one related to social services, which has been positioned to address its key challenges of ensuring that the projects are properly focused and deliverable;
- Strategic financial planning arrangements
- Priorities and their longer term sustainability

In undertaking this work, I have as external adviser, attempted to work closely with the Senior Leadership Team and in particular, the current Acting Chief Executive. This included acting as a 'critical friend' on some occasions.

During the mid-point of the review, the person appointed as the independent Peer Advisor ceased her work with the Authority. I was asked to try to fill some of the gap left by her sudden departure. However, it must be appreciated that there are limitations here in my political observations and findings due to this.

Furthermore, this review was carried out primarily during late July, throughout August and the beginning of September 2019, at a time when the Council was in recess. I therefore only had an opportunity to physically attend one Full Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee meeting. Obviously, having the opportunity to attend more would have given me a clearer picture of democracy in practice. It is because of this situation that the bulk of my report is focused and evidenced more upon the officer/managerial position.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to the Council's Leader and the various political group leaders, the Acting Chief Executive, the Acting Chief Executive's PA, as well as all the staff with whom I have liaised

during my time in Merthyr Tydfil. They have all embraced this review with the importance that it deserves and have engaged with it both openly and professionally.

2. Review Methodology and Approach Taken.

In order to undertake an assessment of the Council, I initially asked 4 key strategic questions in order to best answer the requirements of the scoping review set out on page 2.

1. Does the Council's Political and Managerial Leadership fully understand the current position and significant challenges that the Council faces? Are they fully aware of the scale of transformation and change required to address this moving forwards?
2. Is there an awareness and/or an agreement as to what are the Council's short-term and long-term objectives, including organisational capacity and capability to deliver these?
3. Are there robust strategic transformational change plans in place to respond to these challenges, including financial planning arrangements, governance and scrutiny arrangements, as well as clear communication plans?
4. Does the Council have an agreed Political and Managerial strategy to make the Council sustainable?

In order to assess and analyse the answers to the above questions, I deployed a style and methodology similar to a combination of a peer review and an inspection. This involved a combination of 1:1 interviews and discussions with those individuals and organisations outlined below.

- Interviews with the Leader and all the different Group Leaders. The various Group Leader interviews only took place following the late departure of the Independent Peer Advisor.
- Interviews with the Acting CEO and all the Senior and Middle Managers.
- Interviews with senior officers and managers responsible for the various work streams as part of the change programme. These included Social Care, Human Resources, Leisure, Governance, Schools, Land Use, Income, Poverty, Engagement, Efficiency and Sustainability
- Interviews with the local Union representatives including Unite and GMB
- Interviews with key external partners/organisations such as the Welsh Government, Welsh LGA, Cwm Taf Partnership, CIW and Welsh Audit Office.
- In addition to this, I attended various management meetings such as Senior Management Team on several occasions, Corporate Management Team,

Change Team Huddle and the Change and Well-Being Programme Board. Due to the summer recess, I only managed to attend one Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Full Council.

- Read, reviewed and discussed over 60 reports and documents, especially those relating to Finance, Leadership and Governance, Social Care and Strategic change.

Disclaimer.

The information set out within this report is limited by the departure of the Independent Peer Advisor mid-way through the assignment. Accordingly, my report is more focused upon the managerial elements and challenges within the Council. This is primarily due to my ‘brief’ as a non-politician, but also the fact that this work was carried out during the summer recess, where no committee meetings were held.

The political observations I have put forward have been made with limited involvement with politicians, but it has been informed by some brief observations made by the Independent Peer Advisor to me whilst she was undertaking this work.

3. Executive Summary and Observations.

- Merthyr has a great industrial history and strength in their Regeneration offer. However, although the Leader has set out a Manifesto, vision and aspiration for the area, it is not costed or well understood by officers. The Council needs to set out a shared and understood vision, and an aspiration of ‘Place’. Identification of the outcomes and other success factors that will deliver the vision and will need to clarify, ‘What will Merthyr look like in 5 years’ time’?
- The Council is locked into ‘survival mode’, which leads to political and managerial leadership, thinking and planning over a short time period. This has meant a lack of clarity regarding the short-term and long-term objectives of the Council and difficulties in planning to meet the Council’s severe financial pressures. It also translates to not seeking wider opportunities or learning from outside the area concerning best practice, which they need to do in order to move the Council forward.
- At the time of writing this report, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a one-year Spending Plan. Whilst this may benefit Merthyr financially in the short term, it may inadvertently deflect their need to prioritise transformational change. For example, too much emphasis is being placed on the need for Children’s Social Care to balance their budget and a lack of acceptance about the need to transform the rest of the Council.

- There was little evidence of collaborative working operating between the different political Groups or proactive examples of cross party working at the time of my review. There was however, a positive growing recognition in my involvement with the various Group Leaders that there is a need to work together for the benefit of Council's residents. The Leader had introduced a Strategic Development Group involving the Group Leaders to test the appetite and willingness to work together on key issues facing the Council.
- The Leader is seemingly very popular in the local community. He was elected on a platform that included accessibility to the people of Merthyr Tydfil. It was evident that he is strongly motivated to secure the best he can for the residents of the Borough. As a result, he is making himself available for contact at all times by any resident on any matter. However, he is trying to deal with all this direct communication himself every day. It is essential that more focused PA Officer support is provided for the Leader as soon as possible, in order for his workload to be sustainable and to allow him to operate more strategically going forwards.
- Governance is still an area for development. There is a draft Cabinet Forward Plan, but this hasn't been presented to Cabinet for approval yet. There is no single Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which scrutinises Cabinet decisions. There is little evidence of how Cabinet decisions are scrutinised, which currently tends to be primarily via a call-in system. Council officers have begun work to reshape some areas of Governance but this needs to be completely reviewed and a clear scope and vision with associated work plans developed. This would result in officers getting the right information to Members in a timely way..
- During my review, a number of officers reported to me that they were not sure if there was complete alignment between officers and Members. Some officers feel that boundaries of responsibilities have been blurred at times between themselves and some Members. A number of examples have been given to me where advice given by officers has been further verified externally to see if this advice is correct.
- Member support to date has been, in my view, too transactional and not proactive enough. There is evidence of some poor Member attendance at meetings or training events not being followed up proactively. More individual support and guidance to both experienced and new Members would have been beneficial in these circumstances. The historical use of Social Media between some Members has been poorly used on several occasions. There needs to be a particular focus and awareness training upon the use of social media by all Members to help support this.

- In looking at the support given by the WLGA, two Members attend their Leadership Academy course each year. In 2017/18, this also included the Leader.
- The time during the initial absence and then ultimately the departure of the previous Chief Executive and the impact of the Voluntary Redundancy process across the organisation last year, has created an environment where morale has been damaged and some key staff have been lost in some critical areas. Both staff and Unions have confirmed this aspect of morale.
- The Acting CEO, whilst inexperienced operating at this level, has brought a stabilising influence upon the Authority, which is going through challenging times. He ideally needs ongoing mentoring and support from an experienced CEO.
- Across the organisation there is a lack of leadership capacity and expertise in transformational change sufficient for it to make the necessary changes in a 1-2 year timescale. This is a key priority for the Council to address urgently, if the necessary improvements are to be delivered.
- I felt that there was at times a lack of urgency and hence no feeling of it being a 'burning bridge'. Officers developed a range of budget proposals, but these were primarily around reduction rather than doing things differently. As an example, the Council hasn't embraced the need to digitally transform its services across the board
- Strategic Performance Management of the organisation was patchy. There was an absence of a Council 'dashboard', which would enable both Members and Senior Officers the ability to discuss performance and ambition across the range of services and functions the Council is responsible for, in a consistent and informed way.
- The presence of a Council dashboard would ensure that financial information on the Council's position as a whole would also be linked to performance. This would help both politicians and senior managers to think and operate more strategically.
- It is clear that the Council has very significant challenges in respect of the need to strengthen its corporate leadership and capacity. At the time of completing this report, officers were developing a range of budgetary savings proposals in order to address the budget gap of £8.2m for 2020/21. These proposals were primarily serviced based rather than a formulation of a coherent strategy embedded across the organisation. The challenge will be the need to now engage effectively with members across the various political groups in order to secure acceptance of a coherent budget proposal.

- There is a lack of clarity regarding 'change' within the organisation. There were 11 work streams designed as the Programme of Change. One of these work streams is also a sustainability work stream. This has culminated in overstretched resources supporting all of the work streams, resulting in a lack of strategic focus. For example, there are a lot of Social Care change plans ready to start, but they are either poorly resourced or have been delayed several times.
- The work streams have started too late in order to make the necessary impact upon budget savings required for 2020-2021. They are not yet sufficiently aligned or focused, to suggest that they are at the stage of development that will ensure a successful transformation of the organisation.
- There was little evidence of thinking around 'wealth creation'. For example, how could the Council better position itself to generate an ongoing income stream, such as house building programmes, different rental opportunities, and more efficient use of its physical assets or accessing funding from the Public Works Loan Board.
- There is no evidence of consistent communication to staff across the organisation to set out the whole Council picture. Before the election the previous CEO posted a blog to all staff on a very regular basis. However after the election in 2017, this ceased. This was referred to negatively by almost everyone I had spoken to. The Leader does send out occasional blogs but there is a lack of consistent communications across the organisation. Any communications that I have seen tended to be subject specific and not connected as a 'continuing story' around future vision, current challenges and the future change required.
- Similarly, there is an absence of regular, cohesive messages to the public with clarity regarding the vision, explanation of the current situation and the direction of the Council is going to take, to deliver services to residents.
- There is some collaboration with neighbouring authorities for some specific service provision. However, partnership working seems opportunistic rather than part of a strategic direction of travel. Some partnerships have expressed disappointment that Merthyr Council haven't been able to be more proactive in some cases. There needs to be greater ambition for wider collaboration. The Leader realises the importance of this and now sits on the Cardiff City Deal Board, as well as recently being appointed as vice-chair of the Public Services Board. Future proactive partnership working should be aligned with the vision and strategic ambition of the Council, which could also include a range of shared service provision moving forwards.

- The ways upon which the Council is best supported moving forwards will need careful consideration. This could be through a combination of a Strategic Improvement Board, external political peer support, with the appointment of some experienced Interim appointments in some key roles to give capacity, challenge and expertise. I have set out the details later in the report.
- The Council will need to demonstrate the willingness to tackle these challenges in order to require ongoing support for the foreseeable future from Welsh Government and the WLGA. This support needs to ensure that the input and challenge is for both Members and officers, is both long-term and sustainable.

4. Detailed Analysis of the Key Questions.

4.1 Does the Council’s Political and Managerial Leadership fully understand the current position and significant challenges that the Council faces? Are they fully aware of the scale of transformation and change required to address this moving forwards?

This question was posed to see how much the organisation both understands and accepts the challenges it faces. It was also testing their awareness of the scale of the transformation required to move forwards.

Overall, I felt that the politicians, whom the Independent Peer Advisor and I met, were aware that Merthyr faces significant challenges. There was however, no shared view as to the best way to tackle these. Equally, the officers are very conscious of these significant challenges and have been striving to produce required budget savings proposals. As the Council is in ‘survival mode’, they haven’t spent the time to look at good practice elsewhere and so have a vision of what ‘good looks like’. I haven’t picked up the drive or urgency for whole organisational or system change. At the time of writing this report, the UK Government were declaring a series of budget announcements that locally within the Council some comments were being interpreted that this may translate into an improved settlement, resulting that dramatic changes may not have to be made now. I feel that there are too many people within the organisation who are unaware of the scale of the transformation that is required to be able to both manage the financial pressures and deliver a vision for services for the future beyond “reduction”.

I have discussed with the various Group Leaders the implications of working together, all of who are willing to work together for the benefits of the residents of Merthyr. In supporting this intent, the Leader is establishing a Strategic Development Group, designed to support future political working.

Some Key Findings.

- There was recognition by the political and managerial leaders to whom I spoke to, that the Council was facing huge challenges. They felt that this was

due to a combination of tight financial resources and increasing demands upon key services.

- A concerning view emerged within the organisation that Children's Social Care was the only service in the Council that needed to radically change. As this budget is facing clear overspends, there were developing attitudes of "if we sort out Social Services, then all our problems will go away".
- The previous Chief Executive, who has now left the organisation, had regular blogs and general communication updates. Unfortunately, there has been quite a time gap where this void has not been filled by regular communications or messages regarding challenges or any changes taking place. This has left many officers in a position of uncertainty about what the future holds. A recent voluntary redundancy process has further exacerbated this where the numbers applying far exceeded those that eventually left. This has resulted in a number of key staff having now left and several parts of the organisation feeling dissatisfied.
- A number of Members are new to Council working. It takes time to gain the understanding of the operation of a Council and how to work and operate as a politician. Therefore, some Members in the Council have not experienced the sort of challenges they are currently facing. This requires a more bespoke programme of support going forwards.

4.2 Is there an awareness and/or an agreement as to what are the Council's short-term and long-term objectives, including organisational capacity and capability to deliver these?

This question was posed to make a judgement about how much the organisation had agreement and alignment as to what the short-term and long-term objectives of the organisation are. It also tested the understanding of the Council's capability and capacity to deliver these.

Overall, I found that the common response on the short-term objective was 'survival'. There was very little agreement or future planning given regarding longer-term objectives. Although the Council's MTFP is based over a 4 year window, the general thinking and planning within the Council is biased towards 1 year budget planning. Very few officers I spoke to could articulate what their service would look like in 3 or 4 years' time, other than more reduction. There is a clear recognition of a lack of capacity. The size of the Council translates to any changes to either demand or resources means that it is disproportionately impacted. More concerning, was a belief that the capability of the organisation was equipped to deliver the radical changes necessary. Whilst I felt the officers in the Council are doing their job well, they are lacking many of the skills and expertise required to implement such radical changes going forwards.

Some Key Findings.

- The experience of officers having worked in other LA's prior to working in Merthyr is extremely low. Whilst this is good for workforce stability, it lacks the influx of new thinking and expertise gained elsewhere.
- There was a clear lack of longer-term thinking or aspiration articulated by officers. This created a sense of just getting through the year with minimal detriment to services.
- Partnership working seems opportunistic rather than part of a strategic direction of travel. There is some collaboration with neighbouring authorities for some specific service provision. There does however, need to be greater ambition for wider collaboration. This should be aligned with the vision and strategic ambition of the Council, including more opportunities of a range of shared service provision moving forwards.
- The Leader is starting to become more actively involved in some partnerships, but there needs to be greater clarity regarding the reason for such involvement. Many officers feel it is just to hopefully be the recipient of potential funding opportunities, rather than more strategic or reputational intent.

4.3 Are there robust strategic transformational change plans in place to respond to these challenges, including financial planning arrangements, governance and scrutiny arrangements and clear communication plans?

This question was posed to test the actual transformational change plans in place, as well as the thinking, communication and scrutiny/challenge regarding these plans going forwards.

Overall I felt that this area was one of the greatest challenges that the Council faces. I felt that the 'pace' of change required is not set at an acceptable level. The work streams that have been formulated are not advanced enough to secure the savings required to balance next year's budget. A number of the work streams were non-financial, yet the small change team was spread to cover all of the work streams. There isn't currently a single view of the Council's performance. Developing a 'dashboard' overview of the Council's performance and risk would help Members and officers plan and challenge in a more strategic way.

There is still an absence of an approved Cabinet Forward Plan. There is a lack of clarity regarding how Cabinet decisions are scrutinised. At the moment, Cabinet decisions tend to be scrutinised via a call-in system, rather than in a planned programme way through a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Council officers are sensibly planning to balance next year's budget with a reduced use of planned reserves going forwards, recognising the increasing pressure upon their reserves going forwards.

Some Key Findings.

- There were 11 work streams designed to help shape the Council to work differently as their Programme of Change. One of these work streams is also a sustainability work stream, which has become a key priority. This has culminated in overstretched resources supporting all of the work streams, resulting in a lack of strategic focus.
- The development of the sustainability work stream soon became the focus of the officers' work. This resulted in confusion of "what exactly is the Council's transformational change plan"?
- A lot of hope has been placed on the Social Care work stream making the necessary budgetary reductions in reducing looked after children and improved transitions to help balance the budget. In looking in a bit more detail in this area of work, I feel that whilst the service is aiming to address the right issues, any longer term change both in practice and financially will take some time to take effect. At the moment, there are too many programmes of work in this area 'ready to start', which I feel doesn't have the right change resource necessary to make the changes required. At best, this work stream may become a cost mitigation area of work, rather than a direct budget saving as a number of officers are hoping.
- I have concerns that as a lot of focus has been placed upon Children's Social Care, other key areas of the Council's work may have been overlooked. In particular the high spending area of Adult's Social Care will need careful management going forwards, with an increasing ageing population.
- During all of the interviews that I held, I only heard one person mention the need for Digital Transformation to take place. This is a key area of work that needs developing and would be a key factor in any future transformational change programme or service re-design going forwards.
- I have heard little discussion regarding 'Agile' working practices. There are a number of systems and services that both Members and officers recognise needs to change. The urgency to think differently and develop an 'invest to save' approach has not been as forthcoming as I would have expected currently.
- There was little discussion or thinking regarding 'wealth creation'. Many officers with whom I engaged did not discuss the ability and opportunity to establish housing companies, link with the One Public Estate, or look to make more efficient use of its assets.
- The work streams tended to be more service based rather than thematic. This meant that the opportunity to plan cross-Council was lacking. For example, the ability to look at Commissioning and Procurement across the whole Council would be an ideal opportunity for a change in mind-set, as well as develop a contribution to future savings.
- The Council's Scrutiny arrangements need improving. This has been highlighted in previous WAO reports as well. I was informed that last year there were 3 Scrutiny meetings, which were not quorate. I have seen officer proposals, which are being developed to re-shape and re-focus the operation

of Scrutiny, looking at best practice elsewhere. At the moment, Cabinet decisions tend to be scrutinised via a call-in system, rather than in a planned and programmed way.

- In support of this comment, at the time of writing this report, the Council still hasn't approved a Cabinet Forward Plan. I have however, seen a draft copy of one which is soon to be put to Cabinet for approval. Once endorsed, this will enable a future Overview and Scrutiny Committee the ability to scrutinise Cabinet decisions. This will ensure that the Executive are held to account for the efficient exercise of its' Executive functions as part of their future work programme.
- The Council officers had a good understanding of the realism of their budgetary situation. In the reports that I have seen, good monitoring oversight was prevalent. At the time that I was undertaking this work, the Acting CEO and the Section 151 officer had established an exercise to develop a range of budgetary proposals to balance next year's budget for Members to consider. An element of growth was also included in this estimate as well as an assumption of a prudent -1% settlement being forthcoming.
- It seems that the spike in the numbers of Looked After Children that occurred in August 2018, has been better managed this year. In July 2019 the estimated out-turn overspend was projected to be £779k. Initial indications are that this overspend will be reduced by the end of this year and that Looked After Children numbers are being better managed. However, it should be noted that this comment is made with still 6 month's of this financial year to operate.
- Next year's budget gap is estimated at £8.2M, with a £2M growth figure being allocated within this amount. This also includes an estimated £780k of planned reserves to support this target. This indicates that the Council is aware of the pressure upon its' budget and the need to only use a minimum amount of planned reserves where possible.

4.4 Does the Council have an agreed Political and Managerial strategy to make the Council sustainable?

This question was posed to test the strategies that are in place, for the political and managerial leaders to deliver in order to make the Council sustainable going forwards.

Overall, I feel that the Council is still at the early stages of developing agreed strategies that have been endorsed to drive towards being sustainable. Although the Leader has a clear vision for the future of the Borough, there was an absence of this being clearly communicated either within the organisation, or externally to residents regarding expectations. Officers have not costed the Manifesto that the Leader presented to me, so consequently, the Council is insufficiently clear about what needs to be done and how to do it. Having greater clarity of this vision and the transformational change required to make this a reality, would enable officers to

develop the skills, expertise and capacity required to make these improvements necessary.

The key challenge for the Council in order to become sustainable is the political will to work together. In the time that I was conducting my review, I had seen little evidence of cross-party working. I have mentioned previously that my engagement was undertaken during the recess period which obviously didn't lend itself to both Member and officer availability to meet and work together. In order to try to address this however, the Leader is establishing a Strategic Development Group. This group would involve the different Group Leaders. This Strategic Development Group would meet on a regular basis and would be designed to discuss a variety of challenging issues that the Council is facing. It is envisaged that 'rules of engagement' would be agreed concerning how the group would operate, what areas would be discussed etc. This could also be the bedrock upon future potential cross-party working groups, which would be shaped to support service specific challenges.

This is all embryonic in its development, but the success of this way of working will be key in the Borough's future destiny. In all the conversations that I held with officers, they were all of the view that the willingness of Members to work collegiately on key areas of the Council's work was their biggest concern moving forwards.

Some Key Findings.

- Officers could not articulate what they believed was the Borough's vision for the area going forwards.
- All the politicians that I spoke to accepted that everybody needs to try to put the past behind them and work together for the sake of the residents they are representing. They all expressed a willingness to work together on agreed areas in order to begin to build up trust and relationships.
- A number of Members across the whole Council who joined the Authority are very new politicians. Whilst there is a wide-ranging Member training programme available, I feel that it is too 'transactional'. This programme needs to be re-shaped so there is better ongoing bespoke support for new Members in particular.
- Many senior officers feel that some Members are getting involved in operational areas, causing confusion of responsibilities with their staff. Again, a more comprehensive Member support programme would go some way to prevent this.
- The Leader in his keenness to be seen as 'being approachable', tries to respond to all communication he receives directly, with none of this being screened. This immediately forces him into an operational mind-set rather than a strategic one.
- There have been a number of investigations and Member complaints over the years. At the time of writing this report there are still some unresolved.
- I have seen very little evidence or examples of joint Member/officer working at a Leadership level in a planned way.
- The Leader in particular requires more PA administrative support. The PA needs to manage his diary activities as well as having the authority to make

some operational decisions in his absence. This would include screening key decisions aside for him to give his upon, rather than allowing him to be involved in too many operational requests and enquiries.

5. Summary of Strategic Recommendations.

There is a critical need for the Council, WG and the WLGA to see this as a symbiotic relationship moving forwards. The following recommendations are being made, which if implemented will allow Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council to have a strong platform of delivering the improvements required for the foreseeable future.

The Council will need to actively demonstrate a sense of urgency and determination to respond to these challenges. I feel that the Council is now at a point in time where they need to start to build confidence and momentum of the journey ahead, while the strategic recommendations are being considered and hopefully implemented. The Council is beginning to work on some of these areas already, but the sense of urgency and acceleration could be enhanced by some additional short-term advice and capacity, which would help the Council both develop their plans and demonstrate appetite for further improvement.

The actions and recommendations required to help build confidence and provide this momentum of change for the immediate future are:-

5.1 Strategic/Immediate Recommendations.

- ❖ Although Merthyr Tydfil has a history of regeneration and attracting large businesses providing employment to the County Borough, there needs to be a clear vision and aspiration of 'Place'. It needs to clearly articulate, '*what will Merthyr look like in 5 years' time*'? It needs to identify the outcomes and other success factors that will deliver this vision. Having a clear understanding and support for this vision is critical. It will both inspire and motivate staff and will provide a future narrative to be used both internally and externally.
- ❖ In support of the development of a new vision, clarity is required around timescales of delivery and the financial resources required to deliver this. Also, who will take responsibility politically, managerially and by which partners.
- ❖ To immediately establish the introduction of Cabinet/Senior officer away days to jointly strategically plan a way forward. This will help to build this delivery plan and create a positive alignment between Members and officers regarding vision, culture, internal communications and expected behaviours across the organisation.
- ❖ That as part of this work, the initial work around the Strategic Development Group and cross-party working is enhanced and nurtured in order to build a degree of consensus across the political spectrum.

- ❖ There are a number of Councillors across all political groups who are new to Local government, so a more bespoke training programme of support, tailored to specific issues such as the use of social media and understanding roles and responsibilities is urgently required.
- ❖ That urgency is placed upon the need to improve Scrutiny. The Cabinet Forward Plan needs completion and endorsement so the Cabinet executive are held to account for the efficient exercise of its' Executive functions as part of their future work programme.
- ❖ The Leader needs more focused PA Officer support in order for his workload to be sustainable and to allow him the necessary 'space' to operate more strategically going forwards. Along with the normal diary and administrative work, the PA needs to be able to deal with the general day to day enquiries and communications the Leader receives. They need to understand and set aside the strategic and political issues for the Leader to concentrate his time upon going forwards.
- ❖ The MTFP needs to be aligned to the vision and to the emerging transformational change programme. This should include areas to invest to save where applicable, such as supporting the change work required regarding Social Services.
- ❖ The existing 11 work streams need be consolidated into 3 or 4 thematic areas of work, which needs to be the foundation of the future transformational change programme. Existing internal change resource need to be reconfigured to focus upon these reduced thematic areas.
- ❖ The introduction of an improved performance management process is needed, which clearly measures the delivery of the vision and the outcomes. This can be assisted by the need to develop a Council 'dashboard', where strategic discussions, challenges and decisions can be well supported.
- ❖ There is currently embryonic development of a national 'financial health tool'. Once this has been perfected this could also be utilised as part of this 'suite' of performance management intelligence going forwards.
- ❖ There is an urgency to develop a new communications strategy. This needs to include regular blogs by Leaders and regular and consistent internal communications to staff. This should initially be focused around supporting the key messages of the vision and the changes required to deliver this. In essence, the 'future story of Merthyr'.
- ❖ To plan in conjunction with the support of WG and WLGA, an effective leadership and development programme for Members that recognises all of their roles eg. Cabinet, Opposition Members, Scrutiny etc.

5.2 Strategic/Longer -Term Recommendations.

The Council will need to demonstrate working towards achieving the transformational changes needed. This will be seen as a different organisational way of working going forwards. By doing this, it will then provide different opportunities for future development and will position the Council more strategically to future wider partnership working. Working in this way will give confidence to the WG and WLGA, that their programme of support is reaping the rewards that it is intended to achieve, in order to help the Council become more sustainable going forwards.

The Strategic and longer-term recommendations required to be made are:-

Strategic.

- ✓ Consideration needs to be made for the Council to have an enhanced package of sector level support for up to 2 years. That identification is made collectively by the Council, WLGA and WG regarding the necessary financial resources to support the recommendations contained within this report for the foreseeable future.
- ✓ Create a Strategic Improvement Board, so the whole Council can be held to account by key partners such as the WG and WLGA through a set of assurance and challenge arrangements.
- ✓ The Council needs to adopt a more strategic approach to working more collaboratively with other authorities, organisations and partners for key service areas. This would help reduce duplication, be more efficient and save costs moving forwards. This should be aligned with the vision and strategic ambition of the Council, on a range of shared service provision moving forwards
- ✓ Merthyr Council will need to demonstrate to WG, WLGA and external partners that they are up to the task of embracing these challenges. They need to work in a more strategic and focused way. By making the required impact upon the transformational changes needed, including strong political commitment to a different way of working going forwards, will assist the Council in developing future strategic partnership working. This will give confidence to WG that their programme of support is reaping the rewards that it is intended to achieve, in order to help the Council become more sustainable.
- ✓ That WG commissions a brief external review on a 6 monthly basis to check on progress made.

Political.

- ✓ The relationship between the Cabinet and opposition Groups is underdeveloped. Evidence from Councils who have successfully improved corporate and service performance, discover that it is most successful when done on a whole Council basis. Based on my brief discussions with the Group Leaders, I believe that there is potential for

this to be achieved in Merthyr Council if constructive discussions on how this is best achieved take place. This support needs to help equip all politicians to make tough decisions and have an appetite to work collegiately on key areas.

- ✓ There needs to be consideration of enacting external sector level Peer mentor support for the Leader, Cabinet and planning around how other individual political Group Leaders would benefit, in order to help them develop as individual and political leaders going forwards.

Corporate.

- ✓ The Acting CEO needs mentoring and coaching support via an experienced Chief Executive, to help him to step up to his new role.
- ✓ That an experienced Interim Director of Transformation is appointed to develop, oversee and drive a new improvement plan.
- ✓ The Council needs support to modernise and develop transformational change of its services going forwards. There is an urgent need to embrace new 'agile' working practices through the use of new technology, supported by the development of digitally transforming services across the Council.
- ✓ The Council has a lack of capacity and experience in some key transformation areas. There needs to be the development of a 'task force or dedicated project team', which is a foundation of transformational change moving forwards. The new improvement plan needs to help build capacity internally within the organisation. Increased capacity needs to be achieved through some internal secondments and the addition of experienced external interim capacity. They need to cover areas such as digital transformation, performance management, strategy and policy, change management, communications, HR/cultural change etc.
- ✓ That as part of the rollout of the new task force/dedicated project team, resource is allocated to critically review and help deliver the various Social Care change work, which is currently in an embryonic state.