



JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD IN PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY 18TH JULY 2024 AT 5.00PM

PRESENT:

Councillor G. Johnston (Chair)
Councillor A. McConnell (Vice Chair)

Councillors:

M. Adams, E.M. Aldworth, A. Angel, C. Bishop, A. Broughton-Pettit, M. Chacon-Dawson, R. Chapman, C.J. Cuss, E. Davies, N. Dix, C. Elsbury, G. Enright, K. Etheridge, M. Evans, A. Farina-Childs, A. Gair, D. Harse, T. Heron, A. Hussey, D. Ingram-Jones, L. Jeremiah, J. Jones, B. Miles, B. Owen, M. Powell, H. Pritchard, J.A. Pritchard, J. Roberts, R. Saralis, J. Simmonds, L.G. Whittle, A. Whitcombe, S. Williams, W. Williams, J. Winslade, K. Woodland and C. Wright.

Cabinet Members:

Councillors S. Morgan (Leader of Council), C. Andrews (Education and Communities), S. Cook (Housing), N. George (Corporate Services, Property and Highways), P. Leonard (Planning and Public Protection), C. Morgan (Waste, Leisure, and Green Spaces) and J. Pritchard (Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change)

Together with: -

Officers: D. Street (Deputy Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director Education and Corporate Services), M. S. Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment), G. Jenkins (Interim Director of Social Services), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer), R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), L. Sykes (Deputy Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer), R. Hartshorn (Head of Public Protection Community and Leisure Services), L. Lucas (Head of Customer and Digital Services), J. Williams (Assistant Director – Adult Services), K. Cole (Chief Education Officer), S. Richards (Head of Education Planning and Strategy), A. West (Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager), R. Roberts (Business Improvement Manager), K. Peters (Corporate Policy Manager), S. Mutch (Early Years Manager), J. Pearce (Business Improvement Officer), A. Bray (Business Improvement Officer), A. Dallimore (Regeneration Services Manager), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer) and A. Jones (Committee Services Officer).

Also Present:

Co-opted Members: T. Millington (Parent Governor Representative)

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded and would be made available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). Members were advised that voting on decisions would be taken verbally.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P. Cook, D. Cushing, T. D. Davies MBE, G. Ead, C. Forehead, J. E. Fussell, C. Gordon, M. James, S. Kent, A. Leonard, C. Mann, T. Parry, L. Phipps, D. W. R. Preece, J. Rao, J. Reed, J. Scriven, S. Skivens, J. Taylor, C. Thomas, M. Western (Cardiff ROC Archdiocesan Commission for Education Representative) and Mrs P. Ireland (NEU)

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

3. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS AND DIRECTORATE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS

The Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change introduced the report to the Joint Scrutiny Committee on the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) which was part of the Councils Performance Framework. The CPA provided a summary of information and analysis for the period April 2023 to March 2024. The CPA forms part of the overall Council 'self-assessment' activity, of which members were invited to discuss, challenge, and scrutinise the information in the CPA.

Members were advised that the dashboard within the report contained information on the Council's finances, workforce and risks over the last 12 months, and Director's summaries that captured what had gone well and also areas for improvement across the 5 Directorates which were Education, Social Care, Economy and Environment, Housing and Corporate Services. The Committee were advised that the Directors would provide a list of three positives and three areas for improvement for their relevant Directorate and then Members would have the opportunity to ask any questions. It was confirmed that the Performance Management approach was currently being refined and there would be a new process and set of dashboards in use over the coming months.

The Director for Education and Corporate Services confirmed that Education had recently undergone its Estyn inspection and the results would be shared in

September. The profile of the Estyn inspections was the best way of assessing performance and Caerphilly County Borough's profile was very good.

The Directors provided examples of where each of their Directorates performed well, and the areas identified for improvement.

Education – Members heard how best practice methods identified following school inspections were beginning to deliver positive results, how a revised attendance strategy was improving attendance rates, and that safeguarding procedures were considered to be effective. Areas for concern included exclusion rates, implementing the full breadth of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) legislation, and the impact of challenging public sector finances.

Housing – it was highlighted to the Committee that full planning permission had been achieved for around 130 new homes in Oakdale and Ty Darren, and a significant number of empty properties had been brought back into use for both rental and sale via the National Empty Property Homes grant scheme.

Members heard about the significant challenges around finding temporary accommodation for the homeless. Areas for improvement highlighted were the significant backlog of repairs and voids, challenges around recruitment and retention, and improving Customer Service.

Social Services – Members heard how the number of children looked after has remained stable and those on the Child Protection Register had decreased significantly due to work by prevention and family support services. The Director also highlighted that the overall hours of Domiciliary Care waiting to be allocated had dropped steadily throughout the year and was now around 70 hours a week.

Areas for improvement identified focussed on recruitment and retention of staff and carers, and the procurement and implementation of a new social care IT system.

Economy and Environment – it was highlighted that support for business through the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) had been effective, significant infrastructure investment had been made in 3G pitches for example, and a new Waste Strategy for CCBC was currently going through a consultation stage.

Areas for improvement were highlighted within Fleet Management, and the delivery timetable on the secondary placement Local Development Plan (LDP).

Corporate Services – highlights included the development of a new Corporate Plan for the period 2023 to 2028, the successful implementation of the Universal Free School Meals provision across the Council's infant and primary schools, and successful migration of Council Tax and HR systems to the Cloud.

Areas for improvement identified by the Director was that Audit Wales held a review on Service Users perspective and concluded the Council did not provide enough performance information on service users perspective to leaders and members, challenges of accessing certain parts of the organisation via the telephone, and the level of staff sickness/absence rates.

The Chair thanked the Directors and invited questions from Members.

A Member commented that it was good to hear that private properties were being brought back into service but queried if the length of the process could be shortened. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed that there were a large number of voids and highlighted the progress being made to address the situation.

The Cabinet Member for Housing confirmed that there were a number of reasons for the delays. Committee heard that following the Covid-19 pandemic there had been an inability for Officers to access properties which caused a massive backlog in surveys for void properties. There were also 33 WHQS compliance checks that had to be conducted and under recent changes to WHQS this had increased to 44 checks.

Concern was expressed that there was no money for demographic growth in social care which could impinge on the health service particularly in relation to discharges where people cannot leave hospital because Local Authorities were not able to provide packages of care. It was hoped that funding would come from Westminster to the Welsh Government to assist with this. The Assistant Director for Social Services acknowledged that the known growth within social care across both adult and children services had been funded to date and the expectation was that any additional growth would be managed within the budget. The Assistant Director provided reassurances that financial challenges had not impacted on hospital discharges to date.

A Member sought clarification on the total number of void properties and also queried if improved attendance at schools had led to better exam results. The Director agreed that the issue of empty properties was complicated due to probate issues and family disputes for example. The Cabinet Member for Housing then advised that reserves had been used to create a dedicated Empty Properties Team which engaged with property owners in an attempt to get properties back in use. Members heard how the team had engaged with 434 properties over the last two years, and it was confirmed that the total number of voids was 260.

In terms of the query on improved exam pass rates the Chief Education Officer confirmed that the advice provided from Estyn and Welsh Government was that Councils should not collect results and aggregate them into any sort of league table, and this had been the case for several years.

A Member observed that the report was very well summarised, succinct, and found the charts, summaries, and pictorial presentations to be very useful in understanding the Council's position. The Member queried why there were a large number of Corporate Complaints for Economy and Environment that went to stage 2 of the process. He also asked if any contingency plans are built into the Social Services budget in the event that future government grants are not sufficient. It was confirmed that there were a number of reasons why the complaints are dealt with at stage 2 and a full detailed breakdown including lessons learned for each directorate is reported to the Governance and Audit Committee by the Deputy Monitoring Officer.

Members were advised that finance professionals were lobbying Welsh Government on behalf of Local Authorities to have more specific grants transferred into the financial settlement and that whilst there has been some progress there is still much to do. In relation to contingency plans in the event of grants being withdrawn officers advised that the current working assumption is that service areas would have to manage the financial impact.

A Member sought clarification on the position on the buyback project in relation to PFI for Schools. The Section 151 Officer confirmed that there was a key piece of financial information needed from the PFI contractor that has not been provided and a further meeting with the contractor is scheduled for later this month. The negotiations with the PFI were ongoing and it was therefore not appropriate to discuss this further. Members were informed that as previously agreed by Council the final decision to terminate will be taken using delegated powers with a report subsequently being presented to Scrutiny for information.

On budgetary planning the Head of Education, Planning and Strategy advised that schools are offered a 50/50 scheme in that if schools felt that they had money to put into specific projects, the Council would offer to match that funding in certain circumstances.

A Member enquired how schools were being supported in meeting ALN needs. The Member also queried if the Council was considering changing the transport to schools arrangements. The Director confirmed that in terms of home to school transport a decision was going to Cabinet next week to look at both the statutory and discretionary provision, depending on Cabinet approval a period of consultation would follow. In terms of ALN it was clarified that the budget was not being restricted in this area despite the budgetary challenges. The Chief Education Officer confirmed that of the 33 schools inspected all except one had all been praised for the work in ALN.

An observation was made by a Member on the retention and recruitment data within the report and he requested that more information be brought to Members this year to show the Council's position in this area. The Director confirmed that a detailed report would be submitted to the Corporate and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee in September 2024.

A Member raised concerns about the stigma associated with the take up free of school meals, and also highlighted an issue with potholes and flooding in his ward. The Head of Education, Planning and Strategy confirmed that every child at primary school level was entitled to free school meals and a new menu launched by catering had increased take up. The use of a cashless system by Secondary Schools had also helped to address stigma issues. In relation to the potholes and issues with flooding the Director explained that there was a Flood Risk Management Strategy in place, and he outlined that the Council had to bid for funding from the Welsh Government.

A Member wished to put on record their thanks for the professional support received from carers and social care workers over the last few months as their family had been using the service. Clarity was sought on the difference in pay for carers between CCBC and other local authorities. The Director thanked the Member for the positive feedback and confirmed that it would be fed back to the staff. He advised that all Councils are affected by salary scales and are struggling within key areas. Members heard how there were good HR policies in place at CCBC in terms of flexible working hours, annual leave, and he gave examples of staff who had returned to employment with the Council because of these packages and working conditions.

Clarification was sought on whether mental health was taken into consideration equally with physical disabilities when assessments were undertaken for hospital

discharges. Assurances were provided that mental health was considered equally in any assessment.

The Chair thanked Members and Officers

RESOLVED that the Joint Scrutiny Members reviewed the CPA and discussed, challenged, and scrutinised the information contained within the Officers report.

4. MOBILISING TEAM CAERPHILLY – PLACE SHAPING

The Leader of the Council confirmed the purpose of the report was to update Members on the current Place Shaping Programme. The Place Shaping programme was the Council's strategy for delivering capital projects such as new schools, housing developments, sports facilities, and improvements to infrastructure. This report sought endorsement from Joint Scrutiny Committee on the recommendations to Cabinet to allocate funding to the projects in the report. The Council Leader advised that Cabinet have had to make difficult choices to prioritise which projects should be taken forward and which would have to be added to a reserve list awaiting funding. Prioritising schemes that had match funding in order to maximise the Council's return on investment by using the £9.2 million of available funding was referenced in the report.

The report referenced a £7.2 million contingency which represents 5% of the Council's overall capital programme to manage any unexpected priorities or unmanageable cost escalations within the program.

A Member sought clarification on the benefits to town centres. The Director confirmed that Place Making plans for our town centres are a condition of accessing Welsh Government town centre funding, so the Council had a town centre plan called Caerphilly 2035, and he also advised that plans for Blackwood and Bargoed were also in the development stage.

The Deputy Leader advised that these plans were crucial in order to attract external funding.

As there were no further questions the Chair thanked the Committee and moved to the recommendations.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee considered the report, and it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the Officers report be approved, By way of verbal vote (and in noting there were 33 for, 0 against, and 0 abstentions), this was agreed unanimously.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that: -

- 1 Scrutiny Members noted the information contained in the report.
- 2 Scrutiny Members supported a recommendation to Cabinet to utilise £9.211m of unallocated capital funding and supported the progression of the projects set out in 5.5.2.

3 Scrutiny Members supported a recommendation to Cabinet to agree that £7.202m of the unallocated capital be set aside as contingency for the overall Capital Programme.

The meeting closed at 18:32 pm

Approved as a correct record, subject to any amendments agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 24th September 2024.

CHAIR