



JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD IN PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY 6TH NOVEMBER 2024 AT 5.00 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor G. Johnston – Chair

Councillors:

Councillors: M. Adams, E. M. Aldworth, A. Angel, C. Bissex-Foster, C. Bishop, A. Broughton-Pettit, M. Chacon-Dawson, R. Chapman, P. Cook, C. Cuss, D. T. Davies, E. Davies, G. Ead, C. Elsbury, G. Enright, M. Evans, A. Farina-Childs, C. Forehead, J. Fussell, C. Gordon, D. Harse, T. Heron, A. Hussey, D. Ingram-Jones, L. Jeremiah, C. Mann, A. McConnell, B. Miles, M. Powell, H. Pritchard, J.A. Pritchard, J. Roberts, R. Saralis, J. Simmonds, C. Thomas, A. Whitcombe, L.G. Whittle, S. Williams, W. Williams, J. Winslade, and C. Wright.

Cabinet Members:

Cabinet Members in attendance: S. Morgan (Leader of Council), C. Andrews (Education and Communities), S. Cook (Housing), E. Forehead (Social Care), N. George (Corporate Services, Property and Highways), C. Morgan (Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces), E. Stenner (Finance and Performance), and J. Pritchard (Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change).

Together with:

Officers: D. Street (Interim Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), M. S. Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment), G. Jenkins (Interim Corporate Director of Social Services), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), L. Sykes (Deputy Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), B. Winstanley (Head of Land and Property Services), M. Headington (Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager), S. Price (Team Manager), S. Bennett (Fleet Manager), V. Oak (Fleet Maintenance and Operations Manager), M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), A. Dallimore (Regeneration Services Manager), S. Richards (Head of Education Planning and Strategy), A. West (Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager), J. Williams (Assistant Director Adult Services), L. Lucas (Head of Customer and Digital Services), K. Peters (Service Manager, Service Improvement and Partnerships), K. Pugh (Libraries: Resource and Customer Engagement Manager), T. McMahon (Caerphilly Cares Manager), S. Pugh (Communications Manager), S. Ford (Communications Manager), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), J. Green (Committee Services Officer) and J. Lloyd (Committee Services Officer).

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 via Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D. Cushing, N. Dix, K. Etheridge, A. Gair, M. James, J. Jones, S. Kent, A. Leonard, P. Leonard, B. Owen, T. Parry, L. Phipps, D. Preece, J. Rao, J. Reed, J. Scriven, S. Skivens, J. Taylor, and K. Woodland.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

3. MOBILISING TEAM CAERPHILLY – FLEET SERVICE REVIEW.

Councillor N. George (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Property and Highways) introduced the report which updated Members on the outcome of the Mobilising Team Caerphilly Fleet Service Review and sought the views of the Joint Scrutiny Committee on a proposed in-house Corporate Fleet Model for inclusion in a further report to be presented to Cabinet for a decision.

Members were informed that the Council operates a large fleet of 538 vehicles ranging from small vans to heavy goods vehicles which are based at several locations across the county borough. These vehicles are used to deliver many essential frontline services ranging from housing maintenance to recycling and refuse collection and without vehicles many services could not operate.

A Member noted their recent visit to fleet services with the Cabinet Member and suggested that a service review of recruitment and retention practices was required to ensure the best appointments were made. Members were assured that this was the case and that a current review was taking place as part of the Mobilising Team Caerphilly programme. Members were advised that Caerphilly County Borough Council would not be aggressively recruiting moving forwards, due to the financial challenges faced by the Authority. The Member queried the current capacity and whether the workshop was adequate under the new system especially as more work was brought in-house. Members were also advised of the future acquisition of a new site to replace the current Tir-y-Berth facility as part of the agreed Waste Strategy. This site would house a new depot and vehicle maintenance workshop which would be fit for purpose.

A Member wished to outline how he welcomed the report and observed that it protects the Fleet Service for the future.

A Member queried whether the Council would still be taking out external contracts to repair vehicles or if all repairs would be conducted on an in-house basis. Members were advised that whilst external specialist contractors had been used previously it was now intended to bring all vehicle repair work in-house.

A Member referred to the presentation of financial data in the report and noted the decimal format was confusing and requested if monetary values could be presented in a

clearer way in the future. The Member also queried if rationalisation of the Council's 538 vehicles had been considered as part of the cost-saving process. Members were informed that this was an ongoing initiative across service areas and that shared vehicle usage was one of the considerations. The Member enquired about the staffing considerations around the forecasted additional income for the Fleet Service in the future. Members were assured that no redundancies were forecast within the Fleet Service and that additional revenue highlighted was realistic. It was noted that outsourcing was expensive and the plans to move away from this approach would produce significant savings.

A Member commented on issues with refuse lorries using narrow lanes to access farms and sought more information on monitoring driver behaviour. Members were provided with information on the training and monitoring of Council vehicle drivers.

A Member queried whether the Fleet Review included the Housing department and whether taxi MOTs would be conducted in-house in the future. Members were advised that the review included Caerphilly Homes which had 175 vehicles and that the proposals would allow asset maintenance staff to concentrate on housing issues in the future. Members were advised that clarification on taxi MOTs would be sought, and the information would be referred back to Members.

A Member queried whether the introduction of electric vehicles would cause challenges in the future from a maintenance perspective. Members were assured that a training programme was in place to ensure that maintenance staff were equipped to deal with electric vehicles.

A Member sought clarification on hired vehicles and whether this included a maintenance contract which would reduce pressures on the workshop, and if leasing was the most cost-effective way of securing vehicles. Members were advised that charging for the servicing of hire vehicles was a consideration under review.

A Member requested further information on the development of a new product which would improve the accuracy of data gathered. Members were provided with details on work being conducted by the Decarbonisation Team which involved the Optrak system, which would include the tracking of vehicles and recording of the mileage of each vehicle and would allow more informed decisions to be made in the future, together with a reduction of the carbon footprint.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee noted the improvements to the Fleet Service that had been delivered through the Mobilising Team Caerphilly programme and provided their views on the proposed in-house Corporate Fleet Model for inclusion in a further report to be presented to Cabinet.

4. MOBILISING TEAM CAERPHILLY – PROGRAMME UPDATE.

Councillor S. Morgan (Leader of Council) introduced the report which updated Members on the Mobilising Team Caerphilly (MTC) Programme. Members were informed of the current significant pressure on public finances across the UK, and Central Government, Local Government, Health and other sectors all facing challenges where the costs of delivering services have accelerated far beyond the level of funding available to the sector.

Members were advised of the impact of these challenges on Caerphilly County Borough Council and the Council facing the need to make £65m of savings during the period 2024/25 through to 2026/27 essentially just to stand still. Having identified a range of permanent savings as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process totalling circa £20m, the remaining balance of £45m must be found over the next two years.

A Member queried the duration of the MTC portfolio and whether Members would continue to be able to monitor it. Members were advised that this was initially set up for 2 years and that all service areas would be considered and reviewed. Members were referred to the weekly stand-up sessions.

A Member queried how Officers would ensure that the benefits of MTC would be realised. Members were assured that these would be monitored, and the savings would also be tracked.

A Member requested further information on examples of how council departments are working together to make savings. Members were referred to the stand-up session held earlier that day which provided details of collaborative working between waste services, digital services, finance, procurement, and customer services.

A Member queried why the current spend on Education and Social Services was not considered in the report. Members were advised that the departments that could administer changes more quickly were looked at first and noted that any changes to Education and Social Services would take much longer to progress but would be considered going forward.

A Member clarified that IT services are undergoing a service review to create savings and progress to a more modern and flexible workforce. Members were also advised of training provisions and online support.

A Member queried potential closures of tourism venues such as Llancaiach Fawr, Blackwood Miners, and Cwmcarn Forest Drive, and sought clarification on the vision for tourism. Members were advised that these venues could continue to be provided and delivered other than by the local authority, going forward.

A Member noted the scale of the challenge to balance the books and queried whether CCBC was confident that the required amount of savings would be met. Members were advised that this was an unprecedented challenge and were assured that a thorough process would be undertaken, looking at all services provided by the authority. The Member also clarified that there was no known indication of the settlement figure due to be received on 10th December. Members attention was drawn to the estimated savings referred to in the report.

A Member queried whether any strategies could be implemented to reduce sickness levels that would alleviate staff pressures. Members were advised that sickness absence is included in the portfolio and is currently under review to understand sickness levels and the best way forward to reduce it.

A Member clarified that the 10-year leisure strategy has already been ongoing for 5 years, with the focus on 4 centres that are run by the authority, with specific consultation planned for other sites.

Discussion followed regarding sickness absence and whether the completed review would include specific reasons for absence, including mental health issues, and the relevant support systems, in order for these to be addressed. Members were advised that information is currently available for short term and long-term sickness absence by directorate, together with figures relating to work related stress absence and non-related work stress absence, and it was noted that sickness absence had reduced over the last 2 years, with the review proposing to reduce this level further. Members were informed that systems are in place to support staff with further information available on CCBC website. It was also clarified that information relating to employees who undergo a 'back to work' interview, following a period of sickness absence, and then return to sickness absence

within 6 months to a year, will also be included in the review. A Member noted the current CCBC policy on sickness pay and queried whether any changes were proposed to reduce the period in which staff were in receipt of full pay whilst on sickness absence. Members were advised that these could be considered under the review, together with the current spend on agency staff. A Member requested information on the number of CCBC staff currently on stage 3 of the sickness absence process, whilst also noting that sickness levels would be expected to be higher than other local authorities due to the in-house services provide by CCBC, that are not outsourced to other organisations. Members were advised that this information would be sought and circulated outside of the meeting.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee noted the content of the report and progress to date and challenges for the future.

5. DRAFT STRATEGIC VISION FOR LIBRARY SERVICES.

Councillor C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities) introduced the report, the purpose of which was to allow Joint Scrutiny the opportunity to comment on the Draft Strategic Vision for Library Services 2024-2028, which Cabinet agreed to consult on at its meeting on 16th October, and to notify elected members of the details of the live consultation including timelines, drop-in dates and means by which views will be gathered and considered.

Members were informed that the report explained the consultation process and timeline for decisions leading up to the 2025/2026 budget, for the awareness of elected members and for the purposes of providing details of the consultation to constituents.

A Member suggested that all Members be invited to a site visit at the Rhymney Hub to gain a better understanding of the services offered. The Member suggested that Members focus on the opportunity the report provides as the current model is not meeting the needs of communities. Members were offered an open invitation so that they could visit the Rhymney Hub at any time, at their own convenience.

A Member queried the support available for digital exclusion. Members were informed of the support and digital assistance the Hubs would provide to those lacking confidence or without access to online services. Volunteers would also provide digital support so that more people were able to access services online.

A Member enquired about the number of people who had borrowed books over the last year, and wished to clarify how the Hub locations were chosen. Members were advised that for 2023/24 the physical stock issues were 366,684 which was a reduction on issues before 2020. Members were also advised that the six town centres identified for Hubs provided better options around such issues as parking and public transport. The Chair enquired about the Impact Assessment for towns not chosen as a Hub location, and Members were advised that this was the first phase of the consultation, and that later in the process a wider Geographic Impact Assessment would be conducted.

A Member requested information on the range of services available at the hub model at Rhymney library. Members were advised that CCBC services at the Hub would include Housing Benefits, Council Tax, Caerphilly Cares, and Employment Support, with an appointment system available to assist residents to visit at a specific time, together with services provided by partner organisations such as Gwent Police, Lloyds Bank and the ABUHB. Members were also advised that the number of library books issued, and general footfall had also increased at the Hub.

A Member noted a decline in the number of visits to Rhymney library in the past few years and wanted to thank CCBC for having the Hub in Rhymney, and also wished to note thanks to the library staff, and queried how the Council could further promote these services. Members were advised that as the pilot was successful, promotional work was being developed with colleagues from the Communications Department. Members were also advised that the operating model has allowed for the Hub to be open throughout lunchtime at no extra costs.

A Member queried whether Community Outreach Services would include a mobile library service for those who could not get to the Hubs. Members were advised that the mobile library service ceased a number of years ago, but part of the review was considering the scope of the Community Outreach Service, and in future books could be delivered to specific community locations for collection by residents unable to travel to one of the town centres. The Member then enquired how the hub model would benefit the town centres. Members were advised that compared with data for 2020, footfall had increased by 15,000 at the library hub, and these residents would have passed local businesses on their way to the hub, together with the number of staff based at the hub, who would also be using local businesses.

A Member queried if there were any examples of community-run libraries in other regions and if so, had the projects been successful. Members were advised that there were examples and outlined some of the alternative delivery models recognised by the Welsh Government Public Library Standards.

A Member sought clarification on the total running costs for library services and wished to know the estimated costs if community groups were to run the twelve libraries that had not been selected for Hubs. Members were advised that the total costs for libraries was £2.9M per annum, and current projections were showing savings of circa £700,000 per annum for the twelve libraries, if the decision on the vision was agreed.

A Member queried the impact the Hubs would have on other Community Centres. Members were advised that the voluntary sector and community organisations were included throughout the development stages of the Rhymney Hub. Members heard how the Hub complimented rather than replaced existing community provision and that the consultative process in Rhymney would be replicated in other town centres if the vision under discussion was accepted.

A Member requested examples of budget reductions for the Library Service. Members were advised that in 2016/17 the cost of running libraries was £2.7M and that this had now risen to £2.9M per annum. Members were also informed of the cuts to the Book Fund that have been made over recent years and that 11 of the 18 library sites were now single staffed with reduced opening hours. Members heard how CCBC was spending more on libraries per capita than anywhere else in Wales. The Member also enquired if the new hubs would be in repurposed buildings. Members were advised that opportunities existed in existing buildings at the majority of sites, but challenges still existed at other proposed sites. If the vision were approved, CCBC would be seeking Transformation Grants from the Welsh Government to address some of these challenges.

A Member commented on the challenges at Blackwood Library in terms of accessibility for those with disabilities and praised the Rhymney Hub and the staff who worked at the site.

A Member enquired about the time period for asset transfers if a community group wished to take on the running of a library, and Members were advised that not all buildings earmarked for closure were owned by CCBC and that some are covered by lease agreements. Members were also advised that disposal options were still under review, and it was suggested that a properly constituted community group might expect the asset

to be transferred to them after approximately 6 months. However, a newly formed organisation might experience a transfer period of approximately 12 months.

A Member highlighted a model whereby a specific library was run by community volunteers with Council funding and queried whether a preferred model of asset transfer had been identified at this stage. Members were advised that the principal aim of the vision was based on no funding from CCBC and stressed that a preferred model for asset transfer would follow the consultation review. The savings of £700,000 were based on no funding from CCBC for the 12 buildings earmarked for closure. The Member also clarified that costs such as heating would be the responsibility of volunteers who had taken over running a library under a Community Asset Transfer.

A Member queried whether CCBC Masterplans were considered when the proposed hub locations were identified. Members were advised that the aims of the Masterplans would be considered in relation to the impact on localities, and it was suggested that a library earmarked for closure could be run by volunteers going forward. A Member sought clarification on the training requirements to ensure any volunteers would be able to provide an informed library and information service. Members were advised that, subject to the final model chosen, the four Community Librarians would be involved in this process, and the relevant training and support would be provided.

A Member commented on the accessibility of hubs via public transport and suggested that a hotline for residents' queries and regular service updates would be useful for residents. Members were advised that the Caerphilly Cares line at the Rhymney Hub was used by residents for this purpose and that a booking system for the hubs would be part of future discussions.

A Member expressed her dislike of the term 'Hub' for the town centre libraries and preferred 'One-Stop Shop' instead. Discussion followed and Members agreed that hubs was the best collective description for the services outlined in the report under discussion.

A Member sought clarification on the potential 'drop-in centre' at Pengam Library, which was currently closed. Members were advised that it was expected to be reopened before Christmas and suggested that an alternative local venue would be found if it had not reopened before the end of the consultation period. The Member was invited to contact the Officer following the meeting, with any suggestions for alternative local venues.

A Member queried whether buildings would be made fit-for-purpose before a Community Asset Transfer took place. Members were assured that statutory maintenance would be up to date in the buildings which were currently open to the public. The Member outlined his view that CCBC should ensure that any building, requiring improvements and transferred to a community group, should be completed and ready to operate and this was noted by the Officer.

A Member raised concerns over public transport and the impact it has on the vision for Library Services in town centres. Members were updated on the challenges faced by the bus industry and highlighted that this was especially the case amongst commercial operators, who were currently awaiting a decision on WG funding.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee considered the details in the Cabinet report and its appendices on the draft vision, hyperlinked at Background Papers, and provided comments.

The Joint Scrutiny Committee provided views as part of the consultation process for the proposals which will be noted as part of the minutes of this meeting and included in future decision-making reports at Cabinet and Council.

The elected members noted the details of the consultation and would communicate the details of it within ward areas and with constituents.

The meeting closed at 7.05 p.m.

Approved as a correct record, subject to any amendments agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 23rd January 2025.

CHAIR