

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - MONDAY, 5 JULY 2021

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON MONDAY, 5 JULY 2021 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor KL Rowlands – Chairperson

JPD Blundell
T Thomas

J Gebbie
AJ Williams

RL Penhale-Thomas

JC Spanswick

Apologies for Absence

DG Howells, M Jones, RMI Shaw and A Williams

Officers:

Deborah Exton	Interim Deputy Head of Finance
Lindsay Harvey	Corporate Director Education and Family Support
Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Claire Marchant	Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing
Janine Nightingale	Corporate Director - Communities
Tracy Watson	Scrutiny Officer

Invitees:

Councillor Nicole Burnett	Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help
Councillor Huw David	Leader
Councillor Dhanisha Patel	Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations
Councillor Charles Smith	Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration
Councillor Hywel Williams	Deputy Leader
Councillor Stuart Baldwin	Cabinet Member Communities

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

25. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 1 February and 14 April 2021 be approved as a true and accurate record.

26. REVENUE BUDGET OUTTURN 2020-21

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change explained that, as requested, she would not go through all the details in the report as Councillors had been given the opportunity to hear the report previously, but commented, for the record, that Members would see a summary of the financial position and drew attention to the narrative which demonstrated that it was an incredibly unique position, this year. As explained previously at Cabinet and Council, the money from the Welsh Government (WG) hardship fund in the first instance, the money from the significant grants that were received in the last quarter, at least £9m in terms of one-off grants that were for specific purposes and the subsidy on Council Tax collection, were the reasons why the year end position looked so different from what had been expected and the position reported to COSC in quarter 3 that had been expected.

The second point, which had been made at Cabinet and Council, was that the overall position remained quite difficult going forward. There were incredible pressures, the Country was still not out of the pandemic and the Directorate Budgets in the main still had an underlying deficit position. The schools' position, in particular was masked by nearly £9m of one-off grants, whereas actually what had been forecast was the majority of schools being in deficit.

It was that uncertainty of the pressures of the future and as Members would have seen in the press, a number of Directors of Finance having to issue Section 114 Notices where their local authorities were actually in danger of going bankrupt, in around 35 Councils. A tale of two halves was being seen, of a unique significant surplus but the underlying position could be quite perilous.

Members of the Committee asked the following:

A Member referred to the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change mention of the grants and hardship funds that had been received in the last few months and the forecast at COSC Q3, which had been a quite different position, and asked if the budgets were foreseeable. The current outturn budget masked the real position, but Bridgend was one of 22 Local Authorities in Wales and how many local authorities in England and Scotland were in the same boat.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change clarified that she felt that the picture was not real, as it stood. It was a true picture in terms of accounting and recording the entries and gave a position, in terms of the earmarked reserves and what those were for, but it did not give the real picture. Just two items could make up £2m in deficit, most of the schools were close to running into deficit positions and some of them were in deficit. It was unique in terms of timing, but it was not unique across Wales. Each of the 22 Welsh local authorities were in a similar position in terms of grants and the hardship fund, but were not all in the same position in terms of their balance sheets and their strengths of reserves. Audit Wales were completing a second piece of work on financial sustainability, which said that despite the underlying deficit position, the Council still had a fairly strong level of reserves, which is where the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change wanted to be going into a very uncertain future in terms of the pressures being faced. She was heartened by this as she was constantly looking at other councils that were facing very difficult positions, a lot of which had entered into large commercial enterprises and some getting into difficulties.

A Member referred to the two particularly volatile budgets, referenced in the report, namely Adult Social Care and Home to School Transport, and the decision by the WG to review the statutory distances for Learner Transport and the Cabinet decision held pending the review outcome. She sought reassurance that Officers were still working on the policy and asked if Members could be updated on what was happening, so that when the WG Review was completed, action could be taken to ensure this pressure was alleviated.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support provided assurance that with the overspend position being dealt with, Home to School Transport was a significant matter within the Directorate and this was being worked on continuously. The outcome of the WG review was awaited, but procurement was being examined to make sure it was being delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support agreed to provide an update of this ongoing work.

Clarification was sought whether the 35 councils that had declared as close to bankruptcy referred to by the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change, included any of the 22 Welsh local authorities.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change explained that she could not say if any of the 22 were, although she noted that Merthyr Tydfil County Borough had a very public letter about their financial position prior to Covid-19 and there were a number of councils that were struggling with underlying deficit position that were greater than this Council. The 35 she had referred to, was a Local Government Association (LGA) research piece. The same piece of work had not been done in Wales, although through the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Section 151 Officer Group, a piece of work was being collated on pressures and that position, so there would probably be some further information. From her own contacts, some were facing quite difficult decisions although none of the 22 local authorities had issued a 114-section notice in Wales.

A Member enquired whether the WLGA research would be shared with Members.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change explained that the WLGA survey that was being done, was more for the WLGA to have a position to lobby the WG in terms of the pressures, as a coordinated response. What the Local Authority would receive was a piece of work from Audit Wales on financial sustainability, that was due, late summer, and that would be expected to be delivered to the Audit Committee, who took a very keen interest in this area as well.

A Member asked in respect of 4.1.11 the £882k disallowed, if examples of what that included could be provided. She reiterated that she had raised the issue of Home to School Transport since she had been elected and highlighted the need for a one council approach. The Council was still paying for Home to School Transport, for children that wouldn't be needed if safe routes were provided and asked why this wasn't being done, particularly with an overspend, and should be looked at as a priority. The Member also questioned that the Council was no longer accepting children on buses who would pay, because the Council had deemed them to have a safe walking route.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change confirmed that the majority of disallowed expenditure was for ICT. WG deemed ICT to have a longer shelf life than just the immediate pressure, which was entirely reasonable, so the Council had received 50% of that expenditure back. There were some small amounts disallowed, which had been claimed on administration and things like that. In addition, the Council had chosen to extend the parking offer, which was deemed a local decision, so the loss of income on that was disallowed. There was quite an element of consistency; there was a panel that scrutinised both the costs and the loss of income and the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change felt comfortable that the disallowed amounts were consistent with others.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that he couldn't comment on individual cases but what he could say was that there were some safe routes to school identified and they would make use of those where possible. He agreed that the Council did need to make sure that these were looked at and explored across the whole County Borough. One of the challenges of paying cases was as a result of Covid-19, with the need to manage places on school buses very carefully. He suggested that if there were individual cases, these could be sent through to the team to look at.

The Member confirmed that she had put in a Member referral with regard to the one case. She highlighted the issue at Coity and gave an example of children that got on a bus in Coity, that could see the school from their houses, but there was no safe route because of the lack of footpath. The council had been paying for the bus since the school opened in 2015 and yet if a small section of footpath was put in place, there wouldn't be the need to pay for the bus.

The Chair asked as part of ongoing communication with what the Officers were doing on the Home to School policy, whether the Corporate Director could make sure that this could be considered further.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support confirmed he was happy to consider.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the update on the Council's revenue financial performance for the year ended 31st March 2021.

27. **PERFORMANCE AGAINST WELLBEING OBJECTIVES FOR 2020-21**

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change introduced the report upon Performance against the Wellbeing Objectives for 2020-21. She noted that some Members as Chairs of Scrutiny, would have attended the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) Q4 and presented a brief overview of the report which was a reflection of the year against the Corporate Plan Objectives, which were revised for 2020-21 because of the pandemic and the affect that had on delivery of services and agreed at Council in September 2020. The revised plan defined the 32 corporate commitments to deliver against the 3 wellbeing objectives and set out 46 outcome focussed indicators to measure the progress for the year. The usual process was followed with Directorate business plans, with all the indicators that fed into that corporate plan. Appendices A to D outlined each of the Directorates end of year dashboard and COSC had a key role in monitoring and scrutinising progress of the delivery of those wellbeing objectives.

The year-end data showed that 12 of the 32 commitments were completed, with the other 20 achieving most of their milestones, noting that this was a unique year, with some services not able to be delivered, some partly delivered, and there was a need to bring in new services to assist with the residents living through difficult times. Of the 440 indicators collected as part of the corporate planning process, there were 89 that had targets where the data had been submitted, which was a reflection of the very difficult year. The Council was not able to collect data for all the indicators. Of the 89 indicators with targets over half were on target, 10 were off target by less than 10% and 32 missed their target by more than 10%. There were 51 indicators with either no target or no data available at the year-end, which was detailed in part A of the annex. There were 79 indicators that had trend data, of which 46 showed an improvement or maximum performance with 10 not being able to be improved any further. One indicator was the same as last year, and 32 worse than the previous year.

Members of the Committee asked the following:

The Chairperson advised she had been asked as Chair to make an opening statement about how the report was set out, that some of the information wasn't clear, there was confusion with the indicators going up and down, and some of the data set out.

A Member raised that Members had been asking for an executive summary because of the amount of data in the reports. She acknowledged the recent response, which advised that the Corporate Report Template would not be reviewed until next year, but Members had been requesting executive summaries for each scrutiny report for over 2 years.

A Member advised that this issue had been picked up by the Chairs at the CPA meeting with data hard to understand in some cases. He was trying to see it from a point of view of a person who was not on the Council and looked at the data and asked whether the

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Council were doing well or not from the targets, and it was not very clear for people to understand on certain topics. He noted that there were some that were fine, but some were over complicated, and there was a need to be more succinct.

The Cabinet Member – Communities explained that as a new Cabinet Member at his first CPA he had raised the same issues. He raised that fact that if someone from the public was looking at these documents, would they understand the way they were being presented. It could be confusing unless people were in the industry of understanding performance, which a lot were not. It has been brought to Officers attention at the recent CPA meeting, and hopefully there would be an improvement in these.

The Chairperson suggested a meeting of the three Chairs should take place to open up discussion on how to simplify the reports for scrutiny of performance, including what wasn't understood, what was understood and how the information should be simplified.

A Member asked whether elected members should be having DSE assessments for working from home similarly to Staff.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services confirmed that the e-learning DSE was available to all staff and Members. In addition the Council was working with the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) to determine if there were issues that needed to be addressed, whether they fell within the parameters of what could be provided under the IRPW, or whether the Council did it under anything else. If any individual Members had concerns they could contact the Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services and in the meantime, Members could access the e-learning to undertake the DSE assessment.

The Member suggested that an email be sent to Members of the Council advising them of the E-learning DSE they could access.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services advised that the information had been included in a Bridgend's message that had been circulated to all Members, but confirmed that a specific message would be sent to Members.

A Member asked whether as staff completed the DSE with the view of working at home for a limited period at the beginning of the pandemic, had staff been re-assessed, as whilst it might have been appropriate for them to work at home on their dining room table for 3 months, they may not now have the capacity to do more agile working.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services explained that the DSE was an ongoing process, so staff and Members should be updating it as they felt appropriate. There were staff surveys and also Managers were instructed that whenever they were doing 1 to 1's with their members of staff, they reminded them that if there were changes to their circumstances, they should re-complete the DSE. The offer for the equipment was an ongoing offer, so whenever they needed that equipment it could be made available.

The Member advised she was somewhat reassured and appreciated that staff needed to take some responsibility in completing their DSE. She asked what was happening with those staff that didn't meet the tax threshold, so they were able to claim the working from home allowance, and asked what was being done to support those Members of staff.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services advised that there was ongoing work with the WLGA around the tax threshold and working from home allowances.

It was suggested in relation to the welfare of elected Members, that it would be helpful to do a sample survey of calendars, to have a look at the frequency and length of meetings, to consider some protocol on how meetings, gaps with meetings and comfort breaks within meetings were looked at.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services confirmed that the calendar of meetings was set by Council and this was the starting point for any other meetings to be put in. Unfortunately, there were occasions when there would be more than one meeting on one day. This was sometimes to do with statutory requirements as to when the meeting needed to be held or for licencing issues, for example, these had to be when applications came through the door. Where possible Members having more than one meeting was avoided, but unfortunately in the circumstances sometimes this was unavoidable.

The Chair asked when there would be a move back to the Chamber for face-to-face meetings.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services confirmed that this was being worked on at the moment. At the last assessment, it was calculated that the Chamber could only hold 12 individuals, which would be the Officers that were needed and allocation of certain seats to Members. The Democratic Services Team were virtually visiting the Vale of Glamorgan Council, as they had a hybrid system in place. There was a need to make sure that the Teams technology could link in to the technology in the Chamber, because if they didn't work together there could be a lot of echo and feedback, which would make the meeting quite difficult to run. It was hoped that some hybrid meetings could be held in the Autumn.

The Chair referred to the increase in stress related sickness since April and requested that COSC Members receive monthly updates to monitor the levels.

The Chief Officer Legal, HR & Regulatory Services confirmed that the information would be provided from HR to scrutiny to circulate to Member of the Committee to monitor.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the year-end Council Performance and the revised Corporate Plan targets for inclusion as an addendum to the Corporate Plan 2018-23 revised 2021-22.

28. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Senior Democratic Services Officer – Scrutiny advised that Members would recall that following on from consideration of the work programme for the Committee at the last meeting on the 9th June, the FWP for this committee was attached as appendix A and the FWP for Subject Overview & Scrutiny Committees, 1, 2 and 3, were attached as appendices, B, C & D for co-ordination and oversight of the overall FWP. The Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committees FWP's would continue to be included in the report to COSC with any updates from each round of SOSC meetings included.

She also advised that attached as Appendix E was the recommendations monitoring action sheet, which tracked the responses to the Committees' recommendations from the previous meeting, and referred to the responses emailed to Members of the Committee on the 29th June and 2nd July 2021.

Recommendations:

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Having considered the Forward Work Programme, the Committee made the following recommendations:

1. That Ethical Procurement be added to the Forward Work Programme.

There were no requests to include specific information in the item for the next meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Committee considered and approved its Forward Work Programme in Appendix A, subject to the above, noted the Forward Work Programmes for the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committees following consideration in their respective June Committee Meetings in Appendix B, C & D, and noted the Recommendations Monitoring Action Sheet to track responses to the Committee's recommendations made at the previous meetings in Appendix E.

29. **URGENT ITEMS**

None

The meeting closed at 11:00