

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE RESOURCES & IMPROVEMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN CIVIC OFFICES ANGEL STREET BRIDGEND CF31 4WB ON TUESDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2015 AT 2.00 PM

Present

Councillor M Reeves – Chairperson

G Davies  
RC Jones  
JC Spanswick

E Dodd  
DRW Lewis  
G Thomas

CA Green  
JR McCarthy

EM Hughes  
CL Reeves

Officers:

Satwant Pryce                      Head of Regeneration and Planning

166. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Members/Officers:-

Councillor G W Davies – Holiday  
Councillor D Sage – Hospital appointment  
D McMillan – Unwell  
M Shephard – Other Council business

167. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

168. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED:                      That the minutes of meetings of the Corporate Resources and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 24 June and 1 July 2015 be approved as a true and accurate record.

169. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services submitted a report on the above topic.

RESOLVED:                      (1) That the Committee noted the items due to be considered at the Committee meeting scheduled for 10 December 2015, and the subsequent meeting dated 19 January 2016.

(2) That the Committee also noted the list of further potential items for prioritisation by the Committee, which may be considered at its meeting on 24 June 2016.

170. COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE AGAINST ITS COMMITMENTS FOR 2014-15 AND BUDGET MONITORING - QUARTER 1 2015 - 16

The Chairperson advised that the Corporate Director Resources and the Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services, would remain for the duration of the meeting, as the former was the Officer responsible for the Budget, and the latter was responsible for Performance. He added that other Directors and the relevant Cabinet Member would come into the meeting, in turn, to answer questions on the report that relate to their Directorate/Portfolio.

Communities

The Chairperson then invited to the meeting the Cabinet Member Communities and the Head of Regeneration and Development.

A Member referred to page 22 of the report and noted that four of the seven Performance Indicators shown on this page were showing a downward trend in relation to Year end 2013-14, and she asked the Invitees to give an explanation for this.

The Head of Regeneration and Development advised Members that there were a range of different programmes being considered to better support people in obtaining employment, such as the Workways Project and the Bridges into Work Programme. Further work was also being pursued to secure European Funding that would support further similar such projects as these. She added that the economy in Wales was not good and had not been since the recession, and this was not assisting performance indicator information in certain areas, such as for example, employment initiatives. In 1934 four areas where there was most deprivation were declared, and of these, only South Wales remained as an 'assisted area' in this respect. Work was ongoing however, in terms of seeking economic growth in the County Borough, particularly in the field of Information and Digital Technology, though it was a challenge sometimes to find individuals who had the necessary skills and qualifications to fill jobs in these and other specialist skilled areas.

A Member stated that sickness absence statistics in the Communities Directorate had in recent years shown an improving trend, though page 24 of the papers now reflected a downturn for this. He asked if there was an identifiable reason for this.

The Head of Regeneration and Development whilst not being able to comment on sickness absence in the Directorate overall, confirmed that it had been a difficult year in the Regeneration and Development Section of the Department, with there being cases of long term sickness absence.

The Corporate Director Resources advised that an exercise was being undertaken, whereby the Occupational Health Service of BCBC would be looking more closely than previous at specific cases of long term absences, with a view to getting these individuals back into work sooner rather than later, where that was possible. This would then drive down sickness absence overall within the Authority. This would involve more face to face interviews rather than perhaps telephone conversations that had been adopted more previously. A Project was being initiated by the WLGA to look at trends in all local authorities regarding sickness absence, ie their policies and practises, with the objective being to look at ways to decrease this where it was at an unacceptable level. Last year Merthyr County Borough Council had the best sickness absence rate in Wales, with an

average of 6.6 days absence per employee, so their Sickness Absence Policy could be looked at in order to achieve best practise. The Corporate Director Resources added that BCBC were also looking at other Occupational Health Services in neighbouring authorities to see how they compared with Bridgend.

A Member asked if sickness absence had increased since offices had become open plan, for example, through the spreading of germs etc.

The Corporate Director Resources advised that there was no evidence of this having taken place, and that a considerable number of employees were happy with open plan offices. The majority of employees off on long term sickness absence were usually suffering from stress/anxiety and depressive illnesses and the next biggest sickness absence arose from lumber related complaints.

A Member referred to the bottom of page 19/top of page 20 in respect of data being made available in respect of the costs associated to the Authority due to sickness absence, especially long term absence, and he asked if information could be made available for this in respect of Quarter 1 2015-16.

The Corporate Director Resources confirmed that this could now be made available for Members for this quarter, and on a Directorate by Directorate basis.

A Member noted that there were still a considerable number of commercial properties empty in town centres, with 28 such properties being empty in Bridgend. He was aware that a considerable amount of grant funding had been secured to make good these type of properties and fit for habitation/business. He asked if there was an all Wales figure of other empty properties in town centres that could be compared with Bridgend, in order to ascertain if this figure was too high.

The Head of Regeneration and Development advised that this figure was about average with other similar sized towns in Wales, though there were 'pockets' in town locations where properties tended to be empty, rather than these being spread throughout the town.

She added that as a result of the convergence works in Bridgend, a lot of positive work had been done in a bid to create new investment into the town centre, and this was exemplified at areas such as Brackla Centre, Elder Lane, the Tollhouse, Costa Coffee, and the Tapas bar at the Courthouse. Some of these establishments were already up and running, whilst others would open business soon. The problem was with the more dilapidated properties that required a considerable amount of renovation, and primarily these were the ones that remained empty. Similar problems existed however, in other town centres outside the County Borough. Investment had made a difference, but not so much for the properties that were in a very poor state of condition.

A Member asked if any consideration had been given, to pedestrianise certain roads within and immediately around the town centres, at certain times of the day, in order to encourage disabled people or individuals with vision problems to visit towns more.

The Head of Regeneration and Development confirmed that traders had advised that they would prefer a relaxation with regard to pedestrianisation in Bridgend town centre from 10am – 6pm to 11am – 3pm, and this was being looked at. There was an issue however, in that most of the roads in and around Bridgend had a kerb issue in that there were no upstands. Another difficulty was that erection of signage advising the public of any such changes would be expensive.

In respect of the Budget item, a Member referred to page 54 of the report, and noted that there was a Performance Indicator target of 5 days for reported fly tipping incidents to be cleared. Though this was down slightly from last year she asked Invitees if this could be improved further.

The Head of Regeneration and Development advised that this percentage (ie around 96% could not be improved given the current resources.

A Member referred to the same page of the report, commented that the percentage of highways and relevant land inspected of a high or acceptable standards of cleanliness had reduced from 99% last year to a projected 93% this year, and he felt that this would reduce further due to the budget restrictions the Authority continue to face.

The Member then referred to page 61/62 of the report, and noted that in terms of Budget Monitoring in the Communities Directorate, 45% of the Directorates planned savings required were either showing amber or red on the RAG status in terms of the budget. He asked what the specific reasons were for such projected shortfall.

The Head of Regeneration and Development advised that the reasons for this were primarily for those detailed in bullet point format on page 62 of the report. However, she added that if savings could not be secured in respect of the areas of the Directorate earmarked for these savings, they would have to be found from within other service areas of the Directorate.

A Member noted from page . . . ? of the report, that that the Capital Outturn section of the report covered up to March 2015, yet the Capital Monitoring area covered up to June 2015. He asked why these two areas covered different time periods.

The Corporate Director Resources advised that there was a reason for this and it related to the Bridgend Market project. She confirmed that she would give an explanation on this to the Councillor outside the meeting..

A Member noted from page 73/74 of the report that there was a review of car parking charges showing red on the RAG status. He advised that this had been pending for the last three years, and therefore he asked Officers why this had not yet been fully resolved.

The Head of Regeneration and Development confirmed that this had been delayed in view of all the changes in terms of staffing within the Authority under the MTFs, and the reasons for this, were for the Job Evaluation exercise to be fully completed and the staff re-location moves (including demolition of Sunnyside Offices). It was felt more prudent to do this when issues such as these were fully completed and had established themselves.

A Member again referring to page 73 of the report, asked when the public would be expected to purchase black bags, and how much these would cost..

The Head of Regeneration and Development confirmed that this had not yet been fully established, and this would be the subject of negotiation with the Council's future Waste Services contractor, which was presently under review.

#### Legal and Regulatory Services

The Chairperson invited the Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services and the Head of Regulatory Services to respond to questions on the part of the report relating to the above Directorate.

A Member referred to page 25 of the supplement report and the only Performance Indicator showing red on the RAG status, ie completing to schedule, the Department's Procurement and Commissioning Review.

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services advised that there had been problems with the completion of this, which was largely due to staffing issues (ie vacant posts) both in the Procurement Section and Corporate support Sections. This concern had recently been alleviated, and a main feature of the team's work, the Corporate Contracts Register, had been completed and was up to date. There was also underway a re-structure of the Procurement Team, and different from previously, this Section would provide in future support for all the Authority in terms of procurement, and not just LARS. He added that this would be completed by the end of the financial year. He further added that this service could be shared with a neighbouring authority in the future, as part of a review of how procurement services are delivered in Wales.

A Member noted that the LARS Directorate were required to make £1.4m in savings over the next three years. He asked the Invitees if this was achievable, to which the Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services replied that it was, and that the underspend that LARS had made in the last financial year had been allocated corporately and contributed to Directorates that had overspent in terms of their budget allocation.

The Corporate Director Resources added that the Authorities savings required as part of the budget for the next financial year would be made on a Directorate by Directorate basis by 31 March 2016, though re-structuring proposals required to meet savings sometimes were delayed, and this sometimes resulted in overspends and underspends in Directorates. If these were in the form of overspends, they would then be supplemented corporately.

Members then proceeded to ask questions of the budget for LARS per se.

A Member noted from page 66 of the report, that there was an £80k underspend in Legal Services relating to vacant posts. He asked if these could be filled by agency staff.

The Assistant Chief Executive Legal and Regulatory Services confirmed that whilst he targets the savings he has to make in any given financial year, he also looks at the same time at savings he has to make for the subsequent year. Though there was some budget to allow for recruitment in Legal Services, he explained that there was also a recruitment difficulty with regard to employing Paralegals and Senior Lawyers which was making recruitment and retention difficult within the Legal Department.

#### Education and Transformation

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting the Invitees representing the above Directorate and moved straight into questions.

A Member referred to page 24 of the report and sickness absence within the Directorate. She noted that absence in schools compared favourable with the Children's Directorate. She asked if enough work was being committed by management to Return to Work interviews and overall to improve the sickness absence statistics.

In terms of Return to Work interviews, the Partnership Manager Integrated Partnership Support, confirmed that these were improving, whilst Managers were looking at trigger points and hot spots in relation to sickness absence in the Directorate in order to examine courses and trends. He did not have to hand, information regarding Return to Work interviews conducted for any given period/ the last quarter, though he confirmed that he would obtain this information and pass this to the Member outside of the meeting.

The Deputy Leader added, that he would also secure this information from schools, but added that members that were school governors could also obtain this information directly from the school in question.

The Corporate Director Resources added that School employees weren't the responsibility of this Authority, as these employees came under the purview of the appropriate School Governing body, though as the Deputy Leader indicated, the local authority could obtain this information, and also point out at the same time, those schools that weren't performing as well as they should be on Return to Work interviews.

A Member asked what the cost was for a supply teacher to be brought in as cover for any cases of sickness absence at schools.

The Deputy Leader pointed out that schools operated something called a Schools Mutual Fund, to which all schools contributed to cover staff absence, that covered both long and short term sickness absence.

A Member again referring to page 24 of the papers, reiterated that sickness absence in the Children's Directorate was the worst in the whole Authority.

The Deputy Leader advised that there was ongoing a strong focus on sickness absence across the Authority, and that a Research and Evaluation Panel had been set-up to investigate this. Also, as sickness absence within the Authority was worse this year than last year in all Directorates others than LARS and Resources, the Chief Executive was also paying particular attention to looking at ways to address sickness absence across the Authority, especially in the Wellbeing Directorate where it was particularly high.

The Cabinet Member Children's Social Services and Equalities added that also the WLGA were conducting an investigation into levels of sickness absence across Authorities in Wales, including those associated with jobs that can cause high levels of stress, such as Social Workers.

A Member referred to page 30 of the papers and Code P2.1.1 and the bottom sentence in the comments box, ie there being an outstanding issue with resources within the Central South Consortium, which prevents development and implementation of ICT Action Plans for each Bridgend school being achieved this financial year.

The Partnership Manager Integrated Partnership Support advised that as this did not come under his purview, he would have to obtain this information and pass it on to the Member outside the meeting.

A Member referred to the Performance Indicator whereby the size of the gap in educational attainments between Key Stage 4 pupils entitled to free school meals and those who aren't being across schools in Bridgend.

The Deputy Leader advised that that this P.I. was not strictly as it appeared, in that though there was still a gulf in respect of the above, this had narrowed more in BCBC

than certain other authorities included in the Consortia. In Bryntirion Comprehensive School this year, he confirmed that 52% of pupils who received free school meals there attained 5 GCSE's grades A – C, including in English and Mathematics. This had been identified as a priority by the Consortia. There were a number of legitimate reasons why these children failed, including for example, them being homeless and being taken into care, or perhaps their parents having problems, that in turn impacted upon them and their schooling. This is why early prevention and intervention measures being pursued, were so important in a young person's life where there existed problems such as these.

A Member referred to page 32 of the report and the Performance Indicator regarding the percentage of final statements of SEN issued within 26 weeks (including exceptions), noting that this was showing red on the RAG status.

The Deputy Leader advised that the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee were looking at this issue as part of their Forward Work Programme. It did reflect from comparison with the trend last year, that improvement was being made in this area and there was confidence that this P.I. would continue to improve.

The Corporate Improvement Manager advised that Educational Children's and Social Care Performance Indicators had shown a considerable improvement from last year, and in 8 of the 10 P.I's measured, Bridgend were currently in the top 6 out of local authorities in Wales in terms of Education.

Members then looked at the Budget issues relating to the Education and Transformation Directorate.

A Member referred to page 67 of the report and paragraph 4.4.3, and asked why there had been a slippage in respect of Garw Valley South Primary amounting to £2m.

The Corporate Director Resources confirmed that this was a result of the judicial review undertaken in respect of this scheme including the outcome of this that had resulted in the Project being delayed until next year.

#### Social Services and Wellbeing

The Chairperson at this point in proceedings, welcomed the Cabinet Member Adult Social Care and Health and Wellbeing and the Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Wellbeing to the meeting.

A Member once more, as with previous Directorates, referred to page 24 of the report and the data in respect of sickness absence where the Wellbeing Directorate had the highest levels of sickness absence within the Authority, and asked what action was being taken to improve this.

The Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Wellbeing advised Members that she had only taken over Children's Safeguarding (formerly under the Children's Directorate) last January. She conceded that the sickness absence levels were disappointing, though she assured Members that Officers were making a concerted effort to improve this. She welcomed assistance from the Chief Executive and the newly established Sickness Absence Research and Evaluation Panel which would obviously prove advantageous not just in respect of her Directorate, but the Authority as a whole. There was also work ongoing in her Directorate in terms of training for staff as well as extra work being carried out on putting together data for analysis. She pointed out that there were positions within her Department where employees were working in high risk areas, and these included Social Workers and Care Workers..

The Cabinet Member Adult Social care and Health and Wellbeing added that he was confident that as a result of the work Officers were putting in to secure improvement in sickness absence within the Directorate, this would be reflected in the third quarter of the year's statistics which would in turn give a more positive trend.

A Member referred to page 39 of the report and the percentage of children looked after on 31 March who had three or more placements during the year, and expressed some concern that this Performance Indicator had deteriorated from that of last year.

The Corporate Director Adult Social Care and Wellbeing stated that that sometimes this figure did not reflect positive for good reasons and reasons beyond the local authority's control. These included a decision by the Courts to move a child for whatever reason, a child returning from an Independent Fostering Agency to an Internal Fostering Family, or in cases of emergency, a child going to a holding Foster family.

A Member referred to page 41 of the report and asked what the Authority were doing to support young people formerly Looked After with whom the Authority is in contact, who are known to be engaged in education, training or employment at the age of 19.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing advised that support for these individuals usually came from the Safeguarding and Education teams through organisations such as Just Ask, who give support and advice on issues such as obtaining accommodation, as well as support mechanisms in school and through NEETS.

A member asked if there were any avenues of employment for these young people through the Council.

The Corporate Director Resources advised that there were available offers in terms of work placements, apprenticeships and traineeships. Job opportunities were also promoted for Looked After Children (LAC) cohort with some success, though these opportunities had to be met within the existing budget resources. She added that the numbers of former LAC occupying the above positions could be provided to the Member outside of the meeting.

Members then referred to the Budget part of the report in respect of this Directorate contained within pages 61 – 63 of the report.

A Member referred to page 64 of the report and was pleased to note that there had been a reduction in LAC numbers and there was a projected underspend proposed for the coming year, he asked if Officers felt this trend would continue.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing stated that there was currently a trend that reflected that this number was decreasing, and as of today this had decreased further to a current number of 380.

The Cabinet Member Children's Services and Equalities added that the above was also being assisted by the Independent Fostering Service also now being part of the Council's In-House Services.

The Chairperson noted from the bottom of page 63 of the report, that there was a projected over spend of £284k likely in terms of Learning Disabilities Residential Care, as a result of the provision of 3 additional residential placements in the first quarter of



the financial year. He had been under the impression that there would be a saving in this as part of the Western Bay Project.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that this was not directly related to Western Bay, but due to the fact that costs associated with this type of residential care were significant, and as there had been 3 additional such placements, this was why this overspend had occurred. She added that this figure would be reduced going forward.

A Member referred to page 71 of the report, and the second item on that page listed as a Budget Reduction Proposal ie, support increased independence through enablement and progression in Learning Disability services which was showing currently as being a deficit of 220k for the forthcoming year.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing advised that this was due to work ongoing with the Supporting People Unit where re-tendering of services was taking place. The deficit was due to the fact that there was a number of delays in this process taking places.

### Resources

The Corporate Director Resources referred to page 21 of the tabled paper and confirmed that the average time taken to process Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax (CTB) new claims was showing Amber on the RAG status and was down currently on last year was due to these taking longer to process during the time a different data transfer system was being introduced, as well as there also being sickness absence problems with key members of staff. Though performance had improved latterly, this had not been sufficient enough within given time periods, to reflect this P.I. as green on the RAG status.

A Member pointed out that it would prove advantageous if a P.I. was introduced in respect of the support Directorates had from Human Resources in the management of sickness absence, especially cases of long term absence.

The Corporate Director Resources confirmed that sickness absence across the Authority was being closely looked at through a number of meaningful methods, and not just by the Human Resources Department.

With reference to page 75 of the report, she pointed out that the reason for the forecast underspend in the ICT Department had been due to a number of vacancies in this Department, which had in turn, resulted in some delay taking place in respect of certain projects. This however, was intended to correct itself come year end.

As this concluded business with regard to the agenda items the Invitees had been requested to attend for, the Chairperson thanked them all for their input, following which they then retired from the meeting in order that the Committee could deliberate its Conclusions.

### **Council's Performance Against its Commitments for 2014-15**

Following their discussions with Officers, the Committee made the following conclusions and requests for further information:

### **Additional Information**

The Committee requested that they receive the figures associated with the cost of sickness for the Authority for Quarter 1.

### **Communities**

The Committee expressed disappointment at not having the relevant Officers present to address questions on Neighbourhood Services and other Community based areas and therefore asked that the delays mentioned at para 4.2.2 of the report be further explained.

Members expressed concern over the Red Status for the Budget Reduction COM8 in relation to the Review of car parking charges for staff, given the fact that the Committee raised this in their meeting in June 2015 and had requested that this be dealt with as soon as possible to resolve the current situation. The Committee reiterated this request and asked for an update on this proposal.

The Committee asked that updates be provided to them in relation to the following Budget Reductions:

COM10: Public to purchase their own black refuse bags to an appropriate specification;  
COM11: Implementation of charging for Blue Badge Holders for Car Parking.

### **Education**

Members asked for more information on the 'outstanding issue with resources within the Central South Consortium' which is highlighted within the PI P2.1.1.

The Committee asked for further detail of the schools whose gap between performance of FSM and non-FSM pupils had not been maintained or improved and asked for information on what particular attention was being paid to these schools. Likewise, Members asked for an update on the work being undertaken to look at those schools who had achieved in this area, to determine the potential for sharing best practice.

Members asked for additional information on Flying Start and whether any exploratory work had been undertaken around the combining of these services with others, such as Communities First, where there was the same client base, in order to have more effective, joint up provision.

### **Social Services and Wellbeing**

Members asked for additional information on the success reported in relation to the apprenticeships and work placements for LAC within the Local Authority.

The Committee requested further cost analysis information in relation to the LAC Budget.

### **Referrals to Community Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Members expressed concerns over inconsistencies in the information presented regarding the economy in the County Borough with figures for Job Seekers Allowances reducing, whilst unemployment status is increasing. This, along with reports from Officers that South Wales is the only area that is still identified as and assisted area for economy and unemployment by Central Government, led Members to agree that this

area needs further analysis and examination. The Committee therefore asked that this be referred to the Community Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

The Committee requested that as part of the work being undertaken with traders in Bridgend town centre to look at the potential changes to the Pedestrianisation of the town, Officers should also explore views of non-pedestrianised days, not just times.

Members commented on the fact that whilst there is a PI to clear up fly tipping, there is not a PI relating to the reduction or prevention of fly-tipping and asked that this be raised with Welsh Government as part of the LA's feedback on NSIs.

### **Further Comments**

#### **Resources**

The Committee expressed concern over the underspends in IT in light of the fact that ICT was key to the Authority's transformation and achieving particular budget savings.

The Committee asked that they receive further information in future performance reports relating to the work being undertaken to capture internal customer's views of the HR Support within the Authority.

#### **Sickness**

The Committee agreed that in light of the figures reported for Sickness Absence for 2014-15 and the CRI Committee's previous comments and concerns, there was a need for further examination of this particular area. Given the fact that this subject was cross-directorate and also reports that a number of concerns have been raised in other Scrutiny Committee's; it was agreed that a Joint Research and Evaluation Panel for Sickness Absence be established comprising of the Chair and one other Member from each Scrutiny Committee

The Committee proposed the following points and areas to go to the Sickness Absence Research and Evaluation Panel for consideration as part of their investigative work:

- Issues with Occupational Health - current way the Authority is using them and is this value for money?
- Return to Work Interviews – including a breakdown by schools
- Any impact from new open plan working?
- Costs of Supply Teachers

171. URGENT ITEMS

None

172. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED: That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) (Wales) Order 2007, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business as it contained exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 and Paragraph 21 of Part 5 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

Following the application of the public interest test it was resolved that pursuant to the Act referred to above to consider the following item in private, with the public excluded from the meeting, as it was considered that in all the circumstances relating to the item, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

173. APPROVAL OF EXEMPT MINUTES

The meeting closed at 5.00 pm