

**SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 - THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020**

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 HELD IN REMOTELY VIA SKYPE FOR BUSINESS ON THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor JPD Blundell – Chairperson

N Clarke  
RMI Shaw  
JE Williams

DK Edwards  
RME Stirman

DG Howells  
G Thomas

JR McCarthy  
MC Voisey

Apologies for Absence

P Davies, DRW Lewis, JC Radcliffe, JC Spanswick, E Venables and LM Walters

Officers:

Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Janine Nightingale	Corporate Director - Communities
Zak Shell	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Tracy Watson	Scrutiny Officer

112. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

113. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 dated 16 November 2020, be approved as a true and accurate record.

114. VERBAL UPDATE FROM THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR - COMMUNITIES

The Cabinet Member – Communities thanked the Chairperson for the invitation and the opportunity to demonstrate how the Communities Directorate had operated during the pandemic. He was proud of the way the Communities Directorate had responded, interacted with the public, and had done everything possible to keep going, recognising that this was the most visible Directorate across the whole County Borough. He thanked all staff in the Directorate, the Director herself and all Officers for their monumental effort.

The Corporate Director – Communities referred to the strategic response by the Directorate to the Pandemic, acknowledging that it had been an incredibly difficult year for everyone, and that the response from the team had been exemplary, particularly with Welsh Government (WG) requirements changing rapidly. She advised that it should also be recognised that alongside the amount of effort that had gone into responding to the pandemic, staff had also still been progressing business as usual.

The Corporate Director – Communities made a presentation to the Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on the Directorate and the response. Following which the Senior Democratic Officer – Scrutiny circulated the presentation to Members and the Chairperson invited questions from Committee Members.

Members asked the following:

## **SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 - THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020**

A Member acknowledged that Communities was the most publicly visible of all the Directorates and it had done incredibly well and that this should be relayed back to the whole team. The catch was that the Directorate might be a victim of its own success. The Member advised that in conversations with people in his ward, things like the refuse collection, street cleaning, etc., had been taken for granted as almost as if it had been business as usual, despite the far from business as usual circumstances. He added that perhaps the Communications team could convey what is being done and although it may be perceived as business as usual, the Directorate had needed to adapt whilst also taking on additional functions.

The Head of Operations – Community Services appreciated the Member's comments. He took the opportunity to describe how the Directorate was continuing to be impacted by Covid-19 and asked Members for their patience and understanding. He explained every department was being impacted, and whilst sickness levels of people working from home, were good, every operational department e.g. highways, waste, etc., had individuals not in work due to Covid-19 so they were struggling with operational numbers and this was a real challenge, as numbers were increasing. He explained that planning was ongoing in the event that actions had to be taken to stop some services and to make sure the critical ones were kept going. He advised that he was really proud of the teams, as their response had been phenomenal, but there were lots of challenges right across the board.

A Member thanked the Corporate Director – Communities for the very comprehensive presentation and added his thanks. He advised that what was being seen was a service, which was showing little signs of deteriorating. The Member asked if the local authority would be imposing any local restrictions from the 28 December, as had been done when the pandemic first manifested itself, e.g. closing playgrounds, municipal sites closed or any restrictions, as these were the questions members of the public would ask.

The Corporate Director – Communities explained that this was something that the Local Authority was still working through. WG had communicated the Tiers and the restrictions in each Tier the day before and the local authority needed to understand what that meant in terms of Tier 4. She advised that when the First Minister had made his speech the previous day, he had referred to some decisions being made by local authorities and some by WG. She had a call later in the day, which would hopefully get some clarification of what exactly could and could not be done. The Corporate Director – Communities stated that she would provide a comprehensive list of what this meant for the county borough for circulation to all Members as soon as possible. The Senior Democratic Officer – Scrutiny would forward the link from the WG regarding Tier 4 restrictions to Committee Members, once received.

A Member had sent in a question in their absence and noted that because people were no longer working together in the building what oversight was there and what was being done to understand how staff were feeling.

The Corporate Director – Communities advised that there was a lot that was being done on this front, not just communicating with staff regularly. Within the Directorate, the Director had informal departmental meetings every week on a Thursday with her team, with the information being fed up and down, noting that this was the day after CCMB, so making sure the team received the information directly. There were formal departmental meetings, which were held monthly with colleagues from HR and Finance, to get a picture on performance monitoring. The Corporate Director – Communities had also introduced an extended DMT, not just with her direct reports but with other Managers included in looking at corporate items. There were also regular 1 to 1's. She felt it was important to maintain dialogue with directly managed staff, and this wasn't about people

## **SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 - THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020**

not doing their job properly, it was about people working too hard and too long and the opposite effect to what most people would imagine. Some staff in particular were finding it very hard to distinguish between work and home and staff were being encouraged to have a work life balance. This was being addressed by prioritising work and encouraging people to take leave.

The Corporate Director – Communities advised that she was concerned about welfare, staff taking appropriate breaks, taking their leave and having the rest they deserved. She said that some staff had been referred to some of the Care First training that was available around mindfulness, how to take a break from work, the importance of eating well, physical activity, etc. She also acknowledged the flexibility of working hours for some staff during this time.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained that the new way of working had been a challenge but it had been a surprise how well working remotely had initially worked, however after a period of time some of the challenges of working remotely had emerged. He realised how much he had picked up what was going on from being in the office, interacting in informal chats with team members, and how this had informed his overall picture of how services were being delivered, what was ok and where there were issues. He explained that one of the things Managers were doing was extending their team meetings, by having formal team meetings with direct reports and then reporting on what is going on in each section. This would include Business Support staff that wouldn't necessarily be in the meeting, on a regular basis, to get everyone together and make everyone feel included, otherwise staff could begin to feel disconnected.

The Head of Operations – Community Services felt there were some real benefits from the way staff were working which was reflected in the sickness figures, however there was also a danger that differentiating between being in the office and switching off at home, could be lost. It was too easy to respond to an email because there was constant access to devices and staff could easily be drawn into working too many hours. He advised that some staff had started to show stress because of this and it was therefore about defining self-disciplines for everyone's mental wellbeing.

A Member asked the Corporate Director – Communities whether she was happy with the progress that was being made in assessing and giving out grants.

The Corporate Director – Communities explained that the response from the teams involved had been tremendous as the grants had been incredibly difficult to administer, with some being direct cash grants and some based on non-domestic rates. The criteria was difficult, the process was onerous and it was unrelenting, as once each round of grants had been distributed the next round had been received for processing, but she was very comfortable that staff were ready and prepared. She advised that it had been a baptism of fire in the first couple of months but knowing how important business survival was, some staff had postponed leave at critical times to administer grants. Many automated systems had been put in place, which had really helped and as round 4 of grant distribution approached, so many of the systems were slicker and faster. She had requested WG colleagues make the forthcoming grants simpler, but acknowledged that what WG wanted was to make sure that people were getting the money for the right reasons and had tightened up eligibility for grants to demonstrate the impact on a business. However, the tighter the restrictions the more difficult it was to allocate the money and the more difficult the job became. She felt the teams were ready for the next round and commended this incredibly committed team that were looking at a rota over the Christmas break to enable the grant money to get to businesses. While the Director would like staff to take a break, for the Head of Operations – Community Services and some of his operatives this would mean keeping in touch in order to monitor the situation to report to WG going forward.

The Cabinet Member – Communities advised that Members were now getting a flavour of the amazing efforts of staff to ensure that services carried on through the darkest days. He explained that all this was done with staff themselves not immune to Covid-19, many members of staff unable to work and those remaining members of staff covering as well. It had been a monumental effort by the Communities Directorate staff and he was really proud of them.

The Cabinet Member – Communities thanked the Chairperson and Members of the Committee for endorsing the comments he had made earlier thanking the staff. He explained that while everything discussed today had been in relation to the past, he stressed that on the 28 December Wales would be going into a most stringent lockdown once again and once again would be calling on staff to make the same efforts to ensure Bridgend County Borough Council remained open for business.

The Chairperson asked the Corporate Director – Communities to pass the Committee's thanks back to everyone in the Directorate.

115. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Senior Democratic Officer - Scrutiny presented the report. She advised that Members would recall that the Council had been advised that the Local Government Financial Settlement from WG would be later than expected, and therefore scrutiny of the Medium Term Financial Strategy would be considered by Scrutiny Committees after Cabinet considered the draft proposals on 19th January, instead of the December cycle of meetings, as originally planned.

As set out in the table in paragraph 4.1 of the report, and following approval at November Council the dates for Scrutiny meetings had been moved to:

20 Jan at 10am for the draft MTFS for Education & Family Support and Communities' Directorate.

21st Jan at 10am for the draft MTFS for Social Services and Wellbeing and the Chief Executive's Directorate.

The Chairperson asked for clarification that all Members could attend both Combined meetings of Scrutiny Committees in January.

The Senior Democratic Officer – Scrutiny confirmed that Members of all Scrutiny Committees would be invited to both meetings to scrutinise the MTFS and budget proposals across the portfolios allocated to each meeting. She explained that it was a different approach this year due to the lateness of the settlement, to maximise the opportunity for scrutiny in the compressed timescale available, and to provide opportunity to comment on the overall budget. She advised that if Members were not able to attend there was potential once the report was circulated, to email questions and ensure they were put to the invitees, so this did not preclude Members from asking questions.

In terms of the forward work programme, the Senior Democratic Officer – Scrutiny advised that Members may wish to wait until the MTFS to identify particular items that were more pressing than others that Members may wish to explore. She reminded the Committee that at every meeting there was an opportunity to review the forward work programme.

**SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 - THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2020**

A Member acknowledged that there would be issues that would arise as a result of the MTFS meetings, but following on from the Communities Directorate presentation he felt it would be helpful to have a further update next year as there would be more clarity once the vaccine programme was being delivered, to enable discussion to take place about taking things forward, post pandemic.

The Senior Democratic Officer – Scrutiny also reminded Members that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny committee would receive a report on Quarter 2 Performance at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> January, arising from which there could be areas of focus that Members wished to add to the Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson reminded Members that they could respond to the Bridgend Town Centre Master Plan consultation which would close on 1 March 2021. A Member confirmed that he had completed the survey and encouraged all Members to do so.

There were no further items identified for consideration on the Forward Work Programme for the remainder of the municipal calendar of meetings using the agreed form, and this could be revisited in the next meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the Forward Work Programme set out in paragraphs 4.1 of the report.

116. URGENT ITEMS

None.