

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WEDNESDAY, 2 MARCH 2022

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY, 2 MARCH 2022 AT 09:30

Present

Councillor – Chairperson

JPD Blundell

A Williams

AJ Williams

Apologies for Absence

NA Burnett, HJ David, DG Howells and KL Rowlands

Officers:

Lucy Beard

Scrutiny Officer

Meryl Lawrence

Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny

Invitees:

Councillor Stuart Baldwin

Debra Beeke

Councillor Jane Gebbie

Lindsay Harvey

Carys Lord

Claire Marchant

Janine Nightingale

Councillor Dhanisha Patel

Mark Shephard

Councillor Charles Smith

Kelly Watson

Councillor Hywel Williams

Group Manager – Human Resources and Organisational Development

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help

Corporate Director Education and Family Support

Chief Officer - Finance, Performance & Change

Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing

Corporate Director - Communities

Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations

Chief Executive

Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration

Chief Officer Legal, HR and Regulatory Services

Cabinet Member Resources

65. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR FOR THE MEETING

The Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny advised that the Chair was unable to attend the meeting, so in accordance with the Council's Constitution requested nominations from the Committee for a Chairperson for the meeting.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Blundell be nominated as Chairperson for the meeting.

66. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

67. **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meetings of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 19 Jan and 1 Feb 2022 be approved as a true and accurate record.

68. **BUDGET MONITORING 2021-22 - QUARTER 3 REVENUE FORECAST**

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change presented the report which provided the Committee with an update on the Council's revenue financial position at the end of 31 December 2021. She drew the Committee's attention to the fact that the report did not reflect potential impact on reduction in council tax income, as people had suffered financial hardship and measures had been put in place to support those who had faced difficulty in paying their council tax. However, it was still likely to be a lower collection rate than usual, and this will continue to monitor as the year progressed. She advised that along with the impact on council tax, the ending of the furlough scheme and the potential for new restrictions to address the Omicron Covid variant could both manifest themselves with an increased eligibility for council tax support, but this would be monitored by themselves and Welsh Government. She concluded by referring to the recommendation as detailed in section 9 of the report.

The Chair thanked the Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change for her presentation, following which Members of the Committee asked the following:

A Member commented that the report had been written in advance of January Cabinet up to the end of quarter 3 and it seemed late for it to be considered by Scrutiny in this meeting. He asked that the Authority consider in future the Committee receiving the report at an earlier stage, to enable Cabinet to consider recommendations going forward.

A Member stated it would have been better if they were looking at Quarter 4 rather than retrospectively looking at Quarter 3. He thought scrutiny could be more impactful and supportive to Cabinet if they could provide views, and representations when Cabinet received the report.

A Member proposed that the reports could be timed with Cabinet to enable pre-decision scrutiny, to make recommendations upon performance and finance reports.

The Chief Executive advised that he understood the idea in principle of having up-to-date information, but it may have been more down to the practicality of logistics.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change agreed it was something they could take forward and look at what period they reported to the Committee on the financial position.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.1.4 of the report regarding home to school transport and the additional budget pressure from the year before, but that it could not be sustained. He asked about the link to school catchment areas and where they stood moving forward with long term planning and review of school catchment areas and the timeline.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that work had been undertaken by the Directorate on this and it was an issue that all local authorities were wrestling with. He advised they had looked at a variety of methods of reduction, such as effective tracking of vehicles to make sure the routes are minimised as well as working with parents to see whether they can support more individual transport routes to take

their children to school. He explained the biggest pressure recently was the financial pressure put on the transport providers had gone directly to them and they would be seeing over the next couple of years uplifts in the costs of providing drivers and transport within those transport areas. Regarding the catchment areas, he advised they needed to think strategically as making one change would affect another area. It was a complex matter, he explained, and as with any changes they made regarding home to school transport policy would not happen immediately.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration advised it was a long-term problem which was beyond the scope of powers of an individual Council Education Authority but the long-awaited review of home to school transport by Welsh Government would assist. He stated that reviewing catchment areas would not in itself resolve home to school transport.

A Member asked that given the budgetary pressure in that specific policy area, whether the generous provision that they had in Bridgend was sustainable going forward.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained one of the things the policy did was to provide protection for siblings and learners in different phases of education. As learners moved from phase to phase, they would naturally see less being eligible for free home to school transport. He explained the tapering exercise would lower the impact in the long-term on home to school transport budgets. He agreed Bridgend had a generous policy, but it would become eligible to less pupils as that policy tapered. The biggest issue he advised was the inflationary pressures that they dealt with when going to market. What they were keen to do he explained was to see what came out of Welsh Government regarding the Guidance and then it would be a decision for Cabinet to make on whether or not to change the policy.

A Member expressed that they needed to look at catchment areas when new schools were being built otherwise it was going to cause problems. She stated that the process would not move forward if they were not looking at it and listening to local Members who knew their wards. She gave an example of paying for buses in Coity for children who did not have a proper pavement to be able to get to the school even though they could see the school from where they lived, and they continued paying for the buses while there was no pavement in place. There needed to be movement on these areas as soon as possible.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that one of the challenges with changing the catchment areas was although it would solve some issues it could then present others. He advised that they did not want to put on additional buses if they could prevent it, one of the challenges they had was if there was an existing bus used by existing pupils on another route, they obviously would exploit that and make sure that they gained access, so it would not be an additional bus, but making sure they use that particular asset for that route. He agreed to meet with the Member to provide an update.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration advised they should be incredibly careful with catchment areas as there were knock on effects. He advised that all Councillors keep a close eye on the forthcoming new Local Development Plan (LDP) and how that was going to affect travel to school.

A Member referred to the budget growth in paragraph 4.1.6 and it potentially being insufficient to meet increasing quantity demand to tackle homelessness and asked whether any projection had been made on what would be sufficient or is it an unknown quantity as they do not know how many people are going to present as homeless.

The Cabinet Member for Future Generations and Wellbeing explained they did not know, but that numbers were stable at around 300. She advised that they were seeing an increase in families and some single parent families with one or two children, but it was a mix and impossible to predict.

A Member referred to the addition of the £3M earmarked reserves in paragraph 4.1.8 and asked how the Council's level of reserves compared with other local authorities.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change explained she was unable to do a comparison with other local authorities at this time, being part way through the year. However, during the pandemic all local authorities would have seen an increase in their reserves and some of that was due to late monies coming through from Welsh Government. She did not think their reserves were particularly high compared to other local authorities as she thought they were all facing increasing in reserves, but they had all been earmarked for specific pieces of work.

A Member asked for clarification on whether the £3M addition to the unallocated capital reserve to be utilised against projected capital pressures was included in the overall £9M unallocated capital reserve.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change confirmed that it was included in that reserve and unallocated.

A Member referred to point 4.1.10 and asked which were the volatile budgets for the Directorates, particularly as far as their budgetary management was concerned.

The Corporate Director - Social Services and Wellbeing advised that Children's Services was a volatile budget as it was demand led and they sometimes had to make individual residential placements, which could be very costly and impact on the budget, and difficult to predict in budgetary terms. She also advised the Adult Social Care budget had become increasingly unpredictable post Covid as they had seen an increase in need.

The Chief Executive advised that the homelessness budget was particularly volatile and uncertain with many variables, as well as less obviously some of the support budget was impacted. Across the Council generally energy budgets were incredibly volatile and uncertain, so moving forward it would be difficult to predict exactly what that might cost over the course of the year.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that tenders for work being undertaken right across the Directorate, from Highways, Transportation works to some capital projects, were coming in significantly higher than expected.

The Chief Executive referred to workforce challenges and the challenge that in order to fill specific necessary roles for the Council to carry out their statutory responsibilities, they would see over time an increase in agency costs and the need to commission people and services in order to ensure that they carry these services out.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised there were capital pressures regarding the School Modernisation Programme, similar volatility to the demand led nature referred to in Social Care above, recruitment issues, out of county placements and home to school transport.

A Member questioned how they could reach out across the Borough to better inform what the budget pressures were, the cost of providing services and what was being done. He asked whether they could review their communication with the county borough to provide an update on where their money was going.

The Chief Executive agreed that it was about how they better engage and communicate a better understanding of what they Council does and some of the challenges it faces. They were considering, but had not yet finalised, trying to produce an infographic, which could potentially go out with future council tax bills or if not be available online, to set out in a much clearer way where money is spent. The challenge was that not every member of the public will regard it as the right way to spend the money, depending on the services that they used themselves, but he recognised the need to address.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration agreed it would be useful to insert some charts showing where the Council budget is spent and also the distinction between revenue and capital spending, to try and give clearly demonstrate the magnitude of the budget.

A Member referred to point 4.1.15 where it stated that the Council had taken proactive decisions during the 2020-2021 year regarding the Covid-19 recovery fund and asked whether any work had been done on quantifying the success of those measures taken in that particular financial year.

The Corporate Director - Communities explained it was important to note that they had made a real attempt to bolster their business communities and the visitors into their town centres. The pandemic had been hard so they had full and comprehensive support packages that went over and above to try and do as much as they could to provide protection. Regarding how effective those measures had been, it was incredibly difficult she explained as they were in a global pandemic and the support packages they put in place would not necessarily in themselves prevent businesses from dissolving or ceasing to trade, as Welsh Government had given a significant number of business grants, and assistance with business rates. She advised there was no doubt their packages had assisted but it was difficult in isolation to see whether it was the measures they had put in would have been successful and effective on their own without Welsh Government and to some extent some of the decisions that Central Government had made as well.

The Chief Executive advised that they were in extraordinary circumstances with lockdowns and COVID rules which had meant it was difficult to establish whether each of their individual measures had defined and measurable effect. They had wanted to very quickly and visibly demonstrate their support to local businesses in town centres and did so e.g., with rental holidays and free car parking. The challenge moving forward was that not all those kinds of things were sustainable on a long-term basis and therefore they needed to work with the other stakeholders, including the traders, sports clubs and other people and come up with more sustainable recovery methodology moving forward, which would for example bring additional footfall to town centres.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.1.15 in which stated the balance was being carried into 2021-22 to support those free car parking fees, rental income, and the waiver of sports fees for the remainder of the 2021 season and asked should it state the remainder of the 2022 season.

The Chief Executive confirmed that it was for the remainder of this financial year.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.1.17 asked if the WG Free School Meal Panel had meet and reviewed the claim of the cost of free school meals since this report had been written and if so, what had been the result.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change advised that since the report had been written the Council has received some of the funding due in relation to that item.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.1.22 regarding ICT not being able to recover fixed costs of printers and photocopiers and asked was that a result of contractual arrangements.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change explained it was an internal recharge issue as ordinarily the costs would be picked up by the department and those costs are sent back to ICT so they can pay the contract. The issue had been departments were not printing or using those facilities therefore it was a budget virement between the service accounts and ICT for the year.

A Member asked for clarification on the current position that directors had identified for the specific purposes which they were going to use any underspends, how they were going to mitigate any overspends and had Directors identified the specific purposes in which they were going to use those earmarked reserves.

The Chief Executive explained what they had asked the Directors to do was identify any potential earmarked reserves on a revenue basis for a specific purpose. Additionally, there was the opportunity to move some of the underspend into the capital programme and consequently there were a range of capital bids but insufficient money to fund them all, and that it was an ongoing process.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change added the process for putting capital bids forward had quite a long lead time as the schemes needed to be well planned, they needed to be sure they could be delivered and the timescales over which they would be delivered. She added that the new factor that needed to be considered was around increasing costs on a lot of that capital expenditure.

A Member referred to the outstanding prior year budget reduction of £100k in COM19 relating to the Permitting Scheme for road works that had been in the budget for some time and was awaiting Welsh Government decision and asked that if Welsh Government did not decide to progress the Permitting Scheme, then would pressure be on other areas of the Highway budget.

The Corporate Director - Communities confirmed that this was for the street works to permitting scheme that they had been trying to introduce and it was something used regularly in England where permits are issued to contractors when they go to work on the street and includes all the conditions, so they did not have to continually inspect. This would enable to make a saving against the staff that go out and check on the schemes. She advised that if there was no appetite for the permit scheme, they would need to speak to their Welsh Government colleagues and look at withdrawing it and saving in another way.

A Member referred to where it stated in the report that they were losing income due to the number of children within the borough attending their special needs schools and that surely, they would want their special needs children to be schooled in their area rather than filling up spaces from out of area. She explained the report suggested that the children had a value on them and did not like the way it was potentially worded.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support agreed they were keen to provide the best possible care and support for learners within the county borough, one of the challenges was when they did not have places within their own schools to effectively provide to other local authorities, which came at a cost, but they would endeavour to make the narrative clear in the next report.

A Member asked for clarification regarding the Council-wide budget capital financing figures, what where the cost savings based on that additional spend and how would those decisions be arrived at.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change explained that the rationale behind it was they were paying off some of their loan debt so that they did not have the debt charges coming through in future years. She advised she did not have the information to hand regarding the revenue saving but could provide this to Committee Members.

The Member clarified that the information he was requesting was the difference in spending that million-pound capital project, and the revenue saving, and the decision process.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change explained it was the revenue budget, the money that they had aside to finance their capital spending and on their debt, so they had an underspend that year and were able to make a voluntary additional payment into their minimal revenue provision, so they reduced their long-term debt. She explained it was part of their underspend they were using to offset some of their future debt costs.

A Member referred to table six and the earmarked reserves, he questioned where the unallocated reserves were, so they could see the whole picture.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change advised that it just referenced the earmarked reserves and that they could look at the content of the table and the way it was presented for future reports.

A Member referred to the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process in COM 1 and the narrative regarding the level of funding would also dictate the standard green space maintenance and may result in further reduction of grass cut areas if football teams are not forthcoming through the assets transfer process and queried whether this was the right approach as they should be setting the standards and the budget accordingly for the standard they require.

The Corporate Director - Communities explained that they had achieved the saving via CAT, and she did not think it would come to the point where they would be looking at other areas such as open space maintenance. She advised they were looked at a fundamental review of which one of the things they wanted to do was look at Mow and No Mow Areas in order to look at improvement by diversity and contributing to their 2030 Net Zero Carbon Agenda. She thought as part of that they would have a more robust narrative on how they maintain their open spaces going forward but assured the Member they had not reduced any standards on cuts and COM 1 had been achieved fully on the community asset transfer process.

The Member agreed that mowing areas did need to be reviewed and it would be a culture change with maintenance of areas not being done universally in one way, but it could be done.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that was the intention and welcomed comments on that when they got a proposal together.

The Chairperson suggested it may be something that could be a proposed topic for Scrutiny on the FWP for the future.

The Chairperson advised that there were no further questions from Members of the Committee for the Invitees for this report, thanked the Invitees for their attendance and advised that any Invitees not requested to attend for the next report may leave the meeting.

RESOLVED: That having regard to consideration of the content of the report and the responses to the questions asked, the Committee made the following recommendations:

1. The Committee recommended that Finance and Performance reports be reported earlier to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee (COSC) to ensure timely monitoring of quarterly / six monthly reports on up to date information, COSC meeting dates in the Annual timetable of meetings be scheduled accordingly, and that consideration be given to reporting these reports to COSC before Cabinet to enable Scrutiny comments to be forwarded to the Cabinet to consider along with reports.
2. With regard to the Home to School Transport Budget Pressure and the unintended consequences of planning for development under the Local Development Plan, the Committee requested a timeline on what work has been done on school catchment areas planning, how it is done, what is the timeline, and consideration be given to including it as a potential scrutiny topic for inclusion in the next draft Annual Forward Work Programme.
3. The Committee recommended that the Council be requested to write to the Welsh Government to seek clarity regarding when the awaited report upon Home to School Transport including statutory walking distances can be expected from WG, given anxious correspondence to Members from constituents, parents, and grandparents.
4. With regard to the difficulty of quantifying whether the budget for Homelessness would be sufficient, due to the uncertainty of the number of people who would present as homeless during the financial year, the Committee requested an estimated projection based upon previous years' demand due to concern that sufficient funds are in place to tackle this important issue.
5. The Committee requested that the unallocated reserves be included in the information within Table 6 in future reports.
6. The Committee recommended that communication with residents of the County Borough be reviewed and the development of a clear infographic advising council taxpayers to better inform what the pressures are including distinction between capital and revenue spending, scale of the budget, and including with future Council tax demands.
7. That the waiver of sports fees for the remainder of 2020-21 season should be corrected to 2021-22 in Paragraph 4.1.15 of the report.
8. With regard to the outstanding prior year budget reduction, COM 19 – Streetworks Review (£100k) on page 21 of the report, the Committee recommended the Council write to Welsh Government to ascertain whether there is an appetite for the Permitting Scheme which could be an efficiency for the whole of Wales and if there is no appetite, then it is recommended that the efficiency is removed from the Communities Directorate Budget.
9. With regard to support for ALN learners on page 23 of the report, the Committee requested the narrative regarding the funding be reviewed and amended by the

Corporate Director – Education and Family Support for the next report to reflect more positively the provision of the best support to learners in the County Borough, and not the lack of places available to other Local Authorities.

10. The Committee requested that the Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change circulate the information requested at the meeting to understand the rationale for the Council Wide Capital financing Projected capital borrowing cost savings and how this is arrived at. (Paragraph 4.3.5 Page 31 of the report refers.)

The Committee requested that a report upon the topic of Future Grass Cutting be added to the FWP for Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 for 2022-23, including consideration of future grass cutting, mow and no mow areas, biodiversity, etc. and the implications for a change in culture.

69. **EMPLOYEE WELLBEING**

The Chief Officer Legal and Regulatory Services, HR and Corporate Policy introduced the report and asked the new Health and Wellbeing Officer to introduce herself and some of the initiatives she had introduced.

The Health and Wellbeing Officer introduced herself to the Committee advising she had joined the Authority following recommendations that health and wellbeing needed to be more cohesive across the Authority, as there had been lots of good practice, but having somebody to head it up and promote the resources that they had within the Council to support the staff. She gave an overview of her background in occupational health and experience to date. She had started to familiarise herself with how the Authority worked and had made a few changes to some of the procedures to support managers with sickness absence. She had been involved with Human Resources surgeries on managing absence and had looked at introducing more guidance for the stress risk assessment. She advised she was currently engaged with Halo Leisure in looking at the Halo at Home app as a pilot study for the newly formed Health and Wellbeing Group. She explained they were also trying to look at how they could develop the intranet so that they could collate all the health and wellbeing resources in one place and provided wellbeing information to promote wellbeing when recruiting, as she thought pay was not always the issue when people were looking for a job, it was actually the services that support you in the workplace. She had also engaged with the Employee Assistance Programme, provided by Care First where they had a lot of quantitative data but not a lot of qualitative data which more information was needed. Lastly, she advised she was going to engage with employees who are non-office based to provide wellbeing support and information/advice. She concluded that they had an action plan in place which they were addressing some of which some would be quick wins and others would take longer to provide.

A Member referred to sickness absence monitoring over the year, that non-work-related absence due to stress had been higher in the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate and in Schools and queried why non-work-related absence would not be similar across all Directorates. He also referred to a newly published report on a Future Fit for Wales and a road map to a shorter working week and advised that they were looking for organisations for a pilot and he thought maybe that was something the Council may start to consider looking at for the future.

The Group Manager, Human Resources and Organisational Development advised the reports on stress related absences were provided following a previous report to the Committee looking at absence across the Council and as a direct recommendation from this Committee, they had started recording the information differently and took it back to the beginning of the financial year. She was confident that the information was being

input correctly and advised they had mechanisms to check that was the case, but she would need to comment further outside the Committee when she had the graphs in front of her. Regarding the working week, it would mean people not losing pay which would be a subject for some discussion at the next Public Service Board meeting, but the report had only been recently released, so no doubt there would be more information to follow.

The Cabinet Member for Social Services and Early Help expressed a four-day working week would give them the opportunity to further develop specific workforce, but that the conversation that needed to be had was how they would do it without reducing anyone's pay.

A Member referred to the staff survey and only 14% saying they would want to be part of the Staff Network Group and asked how they were going to address the disengagement. He also asked for the number of people who took part in the learning and development programme and the workshops in the report.

The Group Manager, Human Resources and Organisational Development advised that they continued to do all they could to ensure that staff feel they are able to engage with the Authority and respond in a range of ways through local management arrangements, staff surveys and trade union colleagues. The staff survey feedback report, she explained was being considered by a Heads of Service Group and an Action Plan had been developed. The 14% was quite a number given the number of responses, but she advised it was important that they progressed with it. In terms of the learning and development attendance numbers, they could provide information but did not have it to hand.

A Member asked for clarification on the care first usage, as the information in the first table captured usage between April 2021 and December 2021 and suggested that it was higher in quarter one than in quarter two and three. The second table however, suggested that the new clients had increased in quarter three, so she wondered why the usage seemed lower but the new clients by directorate seemed higher in quarter three.

The Group Manager, Human Resources and Organisational Development advised that they were two different views, the first table talked about the number of sessions or the nature of the contact, which could be for the same person, whilst the second table was about how many new people had accessed this service during the reporting period.

The Chairperson advised that there were no further questions from Members of the Committee for the Invitees for this report, thanked the Invitees for their attendance and advised that they may leave the meeting.

RESOLVED: That having regard to consideration of the content of the report and the responses to the questions asked, the Committee made the following recommendations:

11. The Committee welcomed the positive developments following the appointment of the new Health and Wellbeing Officer from August 2021 and the new approach of toolbox talks, and engagement with staff in different parts of the front line of the Council.
12. With regard to the four day working week report from the Future Generations Commissioner, the Committee recommended that the Authority considers being part of a future pilot project.

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13. The Committee requested that the numbers of people who took part in each Workshop and Course be circulated, in preference to percentages included in the report.

70. **URGENT ITEMS**

None

The meeting closed at 11:38