

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 7 OCTOBER 2021 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor KL Rowlands – Chairperson

J Gebbie	M Jones	RL Penhale-Thomas	RMI Shaw
JC Spanswick	T Thomas	A Williams	AJ Williams

Apologies for Absence

JPD Blundell and DG Howells

Officers:

Lucy Beard	Scrutiny Officer
Debra Beeke	Group Manager – Human Resources and Organisational Development
David Holland	Head of Shared Regulatory Services
Mark Shephard	Chief Executive
Tracy Watson	Scrutiny Officer
Kelly Watson	Chief Officer Legal, HR and Regulatory Services

40. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

41. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee dated 5 July 2021 be approved as a true and accurate record, subject to the above.

42. FUTURE SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The Chief Executive presented the report which included challenges that all local authorities and public services organisations were facing as they emerge into the recovery phase of the pandemic. On a more positive note, it also referred to opportunities and embracing some of the changes that had come about over the last eighteen months and trying to embed them into a fit for purpose model for the Authority moving forward, and most importantly still delivering effective services to the public, while also realising some of the benefits set out in the report regarding work life balance, staff wellbeing, increased productivity and lower carbon footprint.

He felt it was important to recognise that it was not only a Bridgend issue, but other Chief Executives in Wales were doing similar work and examining solutions. The report was more detailed than the Cabinet report to provide Members with updated detail and reassurance of the type of work that was on-going. It listed the strategic principles that they were working on to develop the model and the benefits and challenges moving forward, heading towards, a model that was more blended and hybrid in nature. He advised that it would be unlikely that it would revert back to the way the Authority operated pre-pandemic where most staff worked five days a week 8:30-5pm in an office environment. It would be far more likely they would end up with a model where there would be continued home or remote working for those staff where it was appropriate, but

they wanted to add value to that and unlike during the peak of the pandemic they wanted to be able to create opportunities for people to be able to work in the office when necessary and create better opportunities for people to work in teams when they need to and book meeting rooms to meet up. While there were many things that operated via Teams very effectively, there would be some things that work much better in person, and they were striving for that balance between keeping and embedding some of the things that have worked well including the delivery of services that had predominantly gone virtual and digital, but also recognising that there are some issues and some challenges with the way they have been working for the last eighteen months. For example, in due course they may create hubs around the county borough potentially based in libraries where people could access Council services in a different way to the way they had done historically. It was important to recognise that survey responses had indicated that a lot of the population liked that they could access services digitally and online, so that needed to be retained while also understanding that some people needed assistance. He reassured Members that there was a lot of work going on and emphasised that while it would be an enormous piece of work and was mission critical, solutions were not going to be arrived at quickly. He advised they had set out that they knew they were in an interim phase whilst they carry out the initial work at least until next spring, although he believed it would take a lot longer than that to embed the whole of any new system as they were talking about potential changes in staff terms and conditions, negotiations with trade unions and fundamental changes in their investment in IT for people to be able to work more effectively on a permanent basis and eventually once embedded they may get to a point where office accommodation could be rationalised and have smaller office space. The Chief Executive made it clear that it was not a savings programme, but if in due course there were savings they could be invested elsewhere. It was important to recognise that three thousand staff worked in schools, so a lot of the report would not apply to them in the same way, as with other staff who worked elsewhere in parts of social care or depots. The report predominantly related to office-based staff, however even then it needed to be recognised that people had different roles which could require different amounts of time together in offices. The Chief Executive concluded that the model they were developing had been shaped on the responses they had had from the staff survey and from managers about how best they could do their work moving forward.

The Chair specified that on the report it stated they had mentoring meetings to review the progress of how things are going, she queried whether it would be possible for the Members to have feedback from those meetings.

The Chief Executive advised that a summary of the actions that emerged from each meeting could be provided. He explained it was being run as a Programme Board which he would chair on a monthly basis and that the actions may be of more interest to the Committee as a lot of the work was done in the work streams rather than the Board. He explained that some research from other authorities helped to understand how their models were working, e.g., Monmouthshire had operated without a main office base for five or six years, so there would be some learning from them and then some detailed work for example in IT, to try to understand the level of investment required to properly and permanently ensure people could work effectively from home, which would apply to Members as well as officers.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and advised she would like the Committee to receive further information in future reports including business cases, the setup, potential cost savings, timescales and risks.

The Chief Executive advised that they would emerge in due course, although they were not ready at the moment, but it was the whole basis that during the interim phase through the work stream leads they would need to create various business cases which

would demonstrate, for example an investment requirement – they would not make decisions on investments without properly understanding what the business case was and potentially what the costs and savings were as they move towards a different model.

The Chair referred to the Chief Executive stating the report was staff based and based around what staff had fed back they wanted and recognised that home working would not just be about IT, it would also be about staff workspaces at home, whether they have a comfortable space to work in and had the cost of utilities been taken into consideration.

The Chief Executive advised that what had been highlighted were some of various concerns and issues that they were going to have to work through so in terms of staff working at home, it would not just be the IT equipment, it would be ensuring that if people were to be designated as permanent home workers, they had an appropriate location and desk space compliant with health and safety legislation. As most organisations, because they had had to react quickly had probably for the last eighteen months to some extent had not had the opportunity to address that in quite the way it would be on a permanent basis. Once they knew which staff would be working at home permanently or mostly, they would then have to make that assessment with regard to their work areas and space. With regards to the other issue, one of the things that the Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development would be working through with the Trade Unions was what did it mean moving forward in terms of staff working from home, for example addressing that in their terms and conditions, however the Chief Executive felt it was understanding the full picture as on the one hand there would be savings to staff in terms of commuting costs, car parking, depreciation costs on their cars, on the other hand there are potentially additional costs.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development explained it would be a huge piece of work and whilst throughout the pandemic they had been having discussions with the Trade Unions in terms of the temporary and interim arrangements that they had in place, they had not had the opportunity to properly concentrate solely on the future. What she had proposed to them was that they meet monthly, separately with the agenda item, as it was such a big agenda for them to work through and the Chief Executive was committed to attend those meetings as and when needed.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development explained there was a whole package of things in terms of working from home, the priority having to be about staff working safely of which they have had a long trial period where staff have been working from home and they have been able to gain feedback with regards to what has worked well for them and what needs improvement. She felt that some people may feel there had been a sense of making do whilst others had all the equipment they wanted, however that window did remain open if people needed anything in order to work safely at home. She advised these are the things they need to work through with clear plans in place for the future working model, she admitted they do not have a draft policy in place at the moment, but they have lots of learning from their own experiences and from others good practice and they needed to take account of existing terms and conditions and employment legislation. She advised that although she did not have the answers it was very much in their planning in terms of home working allowance payments, flexible working and travelling expenses and all of that had to be led in some way but they did want to take into account staff wishes and needs but it would need to fit the services delivery model. She acknowledged and believed the report did also that those models will vary from service to service as well.

A Member asked how phone calls were being monitored and the answer targets with people working from home. And if there had been a system in place when they were in

the office that they had then carried out whilst at home. The Member explained that a number of residents had contacted her saying it had taken a long time for them to get their calls answered so there had been a concern on the number of people answering the calls. She also queried the time keeping of those people working at home.

The Chief Executive advised that he had circulated some analysis of phone call responses, and although they could monitor the phone calls to the customer care staff, of which the rate of answering the calls and the productivity had improved compared to when they were in the office, they could not monitor the responsiveness of calls to random Officers' direct telephone numbers, neither whilst working in the office or working from home. He believed the solution to that to move ahead was that they needed to move to a position where the access to the Council was through that "front door", rather than to a particular officer. He explained that on the one hand they were saying to staff they could work more flexibly and there would not be any core office hours, which was potentially where they were heading, this would mean that staff could work hours they chose as long as the outcome of their work in productivity terms, so they do what was required of them perhaps it should not matter when they do it. The issue with that was that as far as the public or elected Members are concerned if they are phoning those people, they may not be able to get hold of them. The Chief Executive believed they had to have a system where their access to the Council through telephone calls had to go through the front desk and in that way, it could be controlled and monitored. He explained it was an example that you could change the operating model of the Council but actually the systems that feed into that model also need to change. With regard to monitoring the hours people are working, the Chief Executive advised that traditionally in local authorities' managers had managed by presenteeism, with most staff present between 8:30am and 5pm, however he felt they were moving much more towards a system where they were measured not so much on being present but being allocated the right amount of work to do in those hours and doing it effectively. That would be an outcome-based focus which would be a challenge and require training and would be different for different jobs. The Chief Executive advised they were talking about a radical change and when they had spoken to other organisations that had already embraced more remote and blended type working it had to base much more on outcomes and output. He expressed that culturally it would be a significant change but one that needs to be embraced and recognised that it was not just about people being present.

The Member referred to staff being loaned to the vaccine program and wondered how many staff were still utilised for the program, how many were missing from the day-to-day jobs and also whether the Council was doing anything with regard to the take up of vaccines in twelve- to fifteen-year-olds. The Member enquired with regard to sickness rates whether the Council was experience shortages of many staff at present due to Covid and the need to self-isolate. Finally, with regard to staff wellbeing, it was positive that so many people had seen working from home as a positive way of working but what was being done with regard to the people who needed the interaction with individuals, for example if they are working from home and live alone and welcomed going into the office to be with other people.

The Chief Executive advised that he did not have the exact number of staff that were seconded elsewhere or in other jobs, however one of the challenges was that there was an impression amongst the public that the pandemic was over and everything was back to normal, but they still had a significant number of staff carrying out Track and Trace and assisting with the vaccine programme, as well as still having staff isolating and some absent with long Covid. A number of staff had to be moved where there had been additional pressures within services caused as a legacy of the pandemic, particularly within Social Care but also in Early Help, Homelessness and elsewhere, so there were multiple things causing stresses on their staffing compliments. He advised it was a wider

picture and was trying to get an overall impression of the pressure that the organisation was under and the challenges that it was facing. He expressed that it was compounded by difficulties in recruitment in so many areas, social care being one of those, but also specific issues recruiting drivers and HGV drivers in particular, whether employed directly or contracted, and also in the Catering Service there were 160 vacancies. He explained it was a combination of all those things.

The Chief Executive explained that with regard to the vaccination for twelve- to fifteen-year-olds they could not make people vaccinate their children, it was clear from the guidance like all vaccinations it was voluntary, and they had not gone down the route in any of their services saying that staff people had to be vaccinated. The Chief Executive advised that generally the take up of vaccines was good, however he did not have the figures for the twelve to fifteen year olds but admitted it was a challenge going forward and was about pushing the message that the advantages of being vaccinated far outweigh any perceived risks.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development advised that in terms of vaccination and TTP the numbers that they had seconded to those areas were relatively low compared to what they had been. However, there was a lot of interaction between their organisation and the other organisations involved to ensure that resources are in the right place, which had been a challenge. Due to the spikes that they had since March of last year, in terms of the activity level there had been occasions where they had managed to persuade staff and managers for staff to be released to find that they are then not needed. On the other hand, there would then be a spike and they needed to mobilise staff quickly. She expressed they had had a lot support across the Council to try and match demand, ICT lead the TTP arrangements and had put different arrangements in to ensure the flux in supply and demand was better managed.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development referred to the new guidance that meant less people had to self-isolate and with people working at home that really had not had an impact. If staff were suffering symptoms and diagnosed, then they would need to be at home and in some cases are unable to work due to illness. She was pleased to say that they had relatively low numbers of staff suffering from long Covid, but they obviously would be happier for that number to be nil. In terms of wellbeing, they had been putting a lot of things in place throughout the pandemic so that staff could access different resource for themselves but also mindful of the working situation. One of the pilots they had put in place was to allocate specific desks for people to book in through discussion with managers if they were experiencing challenges at home for a variety of circumstances. She advised they need to keep an eye on that as they did not want everyone going back in when there was not that specific need as it might go against the models that they were planning, it would take organisation and part of that is making sure staff that are in offices are able to work in a safe and secure way.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development gave the figures of ten staff in Ravens Court for wellbeing reasons and the feedback they were getting was that the staff were benefiting from those arrangements. There were also over 200 desk spaces that had been booked up until September. The next pilot they wanted to put in place was one where there would be more opportunities for more meetings. So, whilst it could not be every meeting, for example a workshop that needed to be held or training if of a wellbeing nature may need to be held in person, so they will need to look at opportunities for people to come together in a safe way.

The Member referred to the digital transformation and the acceleration of that, she was looking for some clarification with regard to the elderly who were not IT literate and what could be done to support them not just by helping them to go online. The Member also enquired what savings were being made at the moment from Civic Offices with it being

closed or with limited access and how is that then been offset against the purchase of equipment for working at home as she assumed equipment would have to have been purchased. Whilst it had been said this was a long-term project, had any Council owned premises been identified that could potentially be sold off as result of moving to around 30% of people working from home.

The Chief Executive advised that in terms of the digital piece, obviously by default over the last eighteen months the vast majority of their service has had to be delivered in different digital way, so that transformation / move towards people receiving things digitally had probably accelerated quicker than had they been in a different scenario. The Chief Executive advised that the Member had rightly made the point with regard to the digital exclusion and that that was something they had been clear on in the project, moving forward they needed to make sure that those who needed assistance had it. He anticipated that for those people who could not access services online, they would still be able to book a slot for someone to assist them. That in the first instance would likely to be at the Civic Offices but that would be no different than it had been pre-pandemic. The Chief Executive expressed that it would be better in due course if people did not have to travel into Bridgend to do that. Going forward he would like to see a local base where people can be assisted by staff to have access to filling in a form or be talked through how to do it online. The Chief Executive explained he did not want to lose the progress over the last eighteen months and had feedback from the budget survey that the vast majority of the public want to access the services online, but it would be a case of recognising that there would be those that will not or cannot and putting in alternative arrangements for those people and they were committed to doing that.

The Chief Executive explained that with regard to timescales and savings, at that moment the savings were relatively limited as both Ravens Court and Civic Offices were still needed and there were still some staff in them, plus part of Ravens Court was a mass vaccination centre for which they received a payment from the Health Board. He advised they were still paying rates and caretaking for Ravens Court and that even in Civic Offices, whilst the building was much emptier the savings were marginal, they were still cleaning it and more thoroughly than before and still had a lot of the fixed costs they would have had previously. Looking forward to 2024 for example, and a different system of working potentially being embedded the Chief Executive would envisage going forward that potentially the Council might be able to release Ravens Court or some wings of it, or it may be used differently. He advised they had been talking to their public sector partners, such as the Health Board, the Police, some of the RSLs about whether there was a different model, shared space which might be effective from a partnership point of view or would there be some of that building that could be released for the private sector as it would be prime office space in the town centre. He advised they were committed to keep Civic Offices, he advised with the feedback from elected Member Group Leaders in particular there was a feeling for the time being that the Council needed to retain its Civic Office as it was very visible and tangible base within the town. It would be the democratic base so would still have the Chamber and hold meetings there, maybe on a hybrid basis, and there would still be somewhere that people would see the Council's presence. Beyond that he added he thought there was an opportunity to rationalise their overall office space when they had the model embedded and were clear about which staff would need to have access to an office on a regular basis. That in due course would either create a capital receipt or a rental income and that would be the end of the process when some savings could begin to be seen. The Chief Executive concluded that working from home there were also potential additional costs in terms of investment in IT and potential changes in conditions.

A Member expressed what a good report it was and acknowledged the massive amount of work ongoing and would be for a number of years to come. He felt disappointed that the report made no mention of Councillors and elected Members as being part of the

model moving forward and how they could work and adapt to change. The Member felt Councillors might want to go back in the Chamber, or maybe into the Members lounge to discuss something or meet a Member of the public. He felt that there were things that could be happening sooner perhaps for Members just to get back and lead the way to show normality can resume in some shape. However there had been very little mention of that in the report and felt that should be part of it has elected Members are part of the Council. He also wished to mention that there may be a danger of creating a two-tier workforce, not intentionally but it had been mentioned that those depo staff, care workers, the people out there doing hands-on work, would not be able to work from home. But there was a possibility of creating a two tier, with all those with the flexible benefits and people who have caring and childcare responsibilities it would work well for them but what about all those that cannot take advantage of flexible working, they could feel disadvantaged. Lastly the Member advised that, possibly for the future, hopefully not, but could this possibly become the next PPI scandal where there were companies waiting to start creating claims that staff could put in for not having the ergonomic, desk, home set up. He wondered what could be done at this stage to record what had been done as he was sure someone could come up with the next PPI saga.

The Chief Executive advised that Members were a really important part of the model. He firstly advised that when he talked about officers having a blended and hybrid model the ideal would be that Members would also say what they would like to be able to see in a year or so was that there would be choice whether to attend meetings in person or perhaps if you do not or cannot attend in person you could access that meeting online. For bigger meetings such as Council that would require a significant software investment, which was not quite there yet, but they were already running some initial pilots, the Standards Committee being the first where they could see how it might all work with some attendees in the Committee Rooms and some attendees connecting remotely from home. He understood that that they could reasonably quickly introduce something for some of the smaller meetings. Members would, in the same way as officers would need to make a choice as to whether they would prefer to go in for those meetings or whether it would suit them to not do so. He advised that they were having local elections next May, he believed last time there had been a turnover of elected Members of around 25-26, and that there was an opportunity post May in terms of new models of working. He continued that they were developing a Member portal, so in the same way he had talked about the public accessing lots of information online, he would like to think that Members too would be able to access a lot more information online through their portal. The significant changes and shifts in the way that they do business would apply in the same way to Members in the same way as officers. He apologised to the Member if the report was light on Members and was not the intention.

The Chief Executive responded that he did not think the model would result in a two-tier workforce and thought it was a recognition that staff do different jobs. He continued that when describing some of the flexibilities you could not expect the same flexibility to a domiciliary care worker as they would need to be in certain place and a certain time, as would a highway inspector and a schoolteacher for example. He advised it would need to be managed very carefully and skilfully with communication being really important. He thought it inevitable that what he had described would only apply to some jobs and not others, which was not any different from other authorities which were some way ahead. He explained they are an extremely large employer with a lot of different services and there would need to be a recognition that some of what is applied will apply to some jobs and not others.

The Chief Executive expressed that the PPI was an interesting point and Health and Safety was an important part of what they were doing moving forward. Both in terms of a safe environment so with regards to letting people back into the office as from a Covid point of view they need to make sure they are not exposing people into an environment

where they are going to be at risk. He agreed with the Member that there are other Health and Safety risks and that is why there is a general recognition that during the pandemic there were a lot of things that were probably imperfect as they had to respond quickly. He expressed that he was immensely proud of how the Council and its staff had responded to the challenges. He advised that once they had established that rather than just being placed in a working space out of necessity, once they are formally identifying someone as a home worker and will work at home on a longer-term basis that probably shifts the rules and would require them to make those assessments of the ergonomics, of the workspace and all the things that go with that. This was a really significant and lengthy piece of work to understand whether they could do that effectively and if they cannot in some people's working spaces what would that mean. Would they then dictate to them that they have to go into the office or as long as they sign up for it themselves that the risks are there, which is all part of the challenge as they know that people's working circumstances are very different depending on the kind of house/flat you live in, who you live with, all of those things would need to be added up and then when identifying categories of staff there would have to be a significant piece of work in terms of beyond their screen and their laptop top going to the chair, desk, potentially lighting and all the other things that are taken for granted within the office. He advised that all the points were valid, and they were things that were on their agenda and things they needed to work to very carefully.

The Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services advised that all issues are being considered. With regards to the Members, they had done a test meeting in the Committee rooms, the electronic system in the chamber was presently not compatible to using Teams, and however they had tried to Hybrid meeting in the Committee Rooms. It was not ideal but a workable solution, unfortunately they can only accommodate low numbers as the rooms when opened up can only hold nine people in light of the Covid regulations and the health and safety assessments. More officers would be needed to be present to service the meetings due to technical support in the background, so realistically they would be looking at only five or six Members being in the room at one time.

The Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services explained the rooms were being used for a flu clinic in October but once that had cleared, they would be looking to do another pilot meeting in November, once decided on which Committee they will be contacted to see who would be agreeable to going in. She explained that they had done a very light touch informal survey a few months ago to gauge Members views on returning and had not received a lot of response to going back in and Members felt remote was working and would rather time was taken to set up a proper process. There was a business case for staff if Members wished to go in for meetings and can contact them to say if there is a particular reason they want to go in. Staff are required to undertake a risk assessment which was available for Members, Health and Safety were looking at the risk assessment in light of the changes to the regulations. However, at the time it had been circulated to Members, if they had scored over a six the mitigation for that was that they work from home. She advised that the situation was changing all the time in terms of case numbers in the community and if Members felt they had a business reason to go in for an informal meeting they could look at that and check and undergo the risk assessments.

With regards to the PPI, the Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services advised that they were aware there were firms out there looking to get their claimants up which was why they were being careful and making sure that risk assessments were done, and that Health and Safety are involved and the current regulations and guidelines were being adhered to. All staff had had the opportunity to do the DSE assessments, quite a lot of staff had been given additional kit, such as chairs and desks, there were offered and some people took them, whereas others had gone in and got their own equipment

from the office. She confirmed they were aware the PPI lawyers were knocking on people's doors, but they were doing everything they could to keep on top of it as things change and keep reminding people to do the assessment to keep themselves safe, but also because they had a duty of care to make sure that their staff and Members were safe as well.

A Member expressed that as an advocate for the public his position would be to look at the report and add a voice and opinion on the public's behalf. He noted that in the report Recommendations in paragraph 9, it stated that 'the information contained within the report on the progress that had been made with regard to the new operating model by the Council', there could have been something in there inviting contribution from the Committee in relation to reviewing the new operating model that would then indicate to the public that Members were fully engaged in the process. The Member advised that a lot of the issues he wanted to raise had already been addressed but he wished to add that before they moved on could they look at the present, at what they were good at with regards to their service delivery and how can that be maintained, also then what they were not so good at.

He stated that clearly the number of Member referrals had increased significantly which would indicate an increase in dissatisfaction, so how was that being captured, and lessons being learnt and perhaps looking at a service delivery model that could improve on services that have been captured by that dissatisfaction. The Member advised he supported agile working however, he queried what support was in place for staff, what management and supervision oversight would be in place and how they would performance manage agile working. He continued that they did not work alone in providing those services and worked in partnership with the trade union movement, with Members and communities and also with statutory partners. He advised these were the issues that he wanted to be reassured were being considered as the challenge to the Authority was that they try and meet customers' and communities' needs and expectations which was more than the initial call, he had examples where the call had been made but there had been no further support to provide that reassurance and confidence. He would like to see the public as the spine through the review of service delivery.

The Chair commented that a couple of the Councillors had mentioned that the referrals were much delayed, and answers were taking a long time to respond, and Members had been holding on the telephone for quite some time before getting through.

The Chief Executive emphasised that the overriding principle in any operating model was around being customer focused, meeting customer needs and being service lead. For example, if there were poor service outcomes due to people working from home, they would not accept that, so the first principle was does this work for the public, would it allow them to deliver effective public services and that would be the overarching principle of it all. In terms of public engagement, he believed Members had an incredibly important role as they were close to the public getting feedback on a daily basis. He advised they had other methodologies as well; through the budget consultation they had asked questions, as an example last year they had asked about digital services and the vast majority of the public had supported that move so they were being informed and shaped by some of the responses. Going forward when they were clear regarding what the model would look like they would need to engage the public again properly and see what they felt about it. From that feedback they might further amend and shape that model depending on the feedback. He reassured them that the engagement with the public was absolutely crucial. He advised that with regard to performance management there would be different requirements in terms of training and different skills that managers would need to have to make sure their staff were both supported and also performance managed. He believed it was about outputs and outcomes and not just

about people being visible for their hours each day, he expressed it was a significant shift and he recognised the detail behind that was complex, but they were working with HR colleagues on how to better support and train managers as well as induct staff into a very different environment.

With regards to partners the Chief Executive advised that it would be an important part of what they were doing moving forward. He advised that a lot of feedback they had had in the past from the public had been about being able to access a range of services in a much easier way, potentially in the same place or same telephone line. He expressed he was quite taken with the idea of shared public spaces, which could work for the public as they do not always differentiate their responsibilities and the police starts for example. He also advised that he had had some interesting preliminary conversations with other local authorities with regard to how it works on a reciprocal basis, for example living in Cardiff but working in Bridgend or the other way around. So instead of travelling to Bridgend each day could services be accessed or work in a base in Cardiff. He advised it would be very early days and did not want to create a level of complexity which was not the immediate priority. The Chief Executive concluded that they only exist to deliver services for the public and do that effectively and he would not want anyone to think that it was not anything other than a customer-focused, customer-led change and if happens along the way to improve work life balance and the wellbeing of their staff then that would be great. Alongside that if they did not do that and a lot of their competitors were, they would be non-competitive to the marketplace, if everyone else had agile policies and they did not it would put them at a disadvantage, so there are benefits to their staff and many other environmental and social benefits, but first and foremost they wanted to deliver an effective public service.

The Member thanked the Chief Executive and advised he was reassured but felt the big challenge was the line of sight from himself to the people who were at the core face and ensuring they share the same values, focus and motivation as the Chief Executive. Although not expecting an answer, he felt from a public perspective it would be remiss of him if he did not say that they listened to what he had to say and support it, but the challenge was to ensure that everybody at the core face of providing public services for Bridgend County Borough Council shared the values, visions and focus and that could be something they could monitor.

The Chief Executive advised that with regard to referrals they were particularly challenged by a set of circumstances, where some of the public and possibly some elected Members believe they are back to normal but normal did not look like it did in March 2020 and it would not. One of the challenges they had as an organisation was the increased demand in an enormous number of their services most particularly social care, homelessness and a range of other. They had a perfect storm in terms of elections next year, elected Members would want to be re-elected and there was an increased demand about a whole range of community issues that people want to see resolved quickly and before next May. He advised they had huge issue with recruitment and retention, not everywhere across the organisation but certainly in the lower grade jobs there was huge competition. They also had a plethora of new responsibilities that had come through legislation through the Welsh Government. He explained that none of that was an excuse as they ultimately needed to find different ways of organising themselves to be responsive and deal with the important things. He expressed that they were somewhat of a large vessel in terms of moving from position A to B and putting their resources in the right places, with most of their resources being prioritised to those services that focused on public health and things that had been prioritised during the pandemic which did mean they were getting a degree of frustration about some of the other services, particularly in some of the visible services in communities where there had not been the same level of investment and focus and would be an important

conversation to have with Members moving forward as the local authority can do most things and did them well but what it could not do was everything.

The Chief Executive wanted to reassure that there were significant efforts being made to try and get underneath the issues they had been finding particularly with the referral system. He advised they were experiencing over a thousand more referrals a year and did not have the additional resource to deal with the referrals but just constantly replying to them which they were trying to change the process around that as well, as there would be something there that needed to get into more self-help where a lot of the answers are available to Members in a different way so that they would not have to tie up officer time in terms of responding to them but the board point was that the authority had to work in many different ways and they were being particularly challenged at the moment as well as having to deal with things that members had brought to his attention and some of their frustrations moving forward so they were trying to shift some resource back to that area of the organisation as well to respond to some of those day-to-day issues.

A Member referred to the point the Chief Executive made with regard to shared workspaces and whether it was something they could bring to scrutiny to look at in more detail. He regarded incorporating the police and other services as a great opportunity to change the way services are run in Bridgend. The Member enquired if that was something that in future could go on the forward work programme.

The Chief Executive agreed that if the timing was right it would be a very interesting topic and something, he knew colleagues from Valleys to Coast and the Police had been quite engaged with. He did not the thinking was fully formed but a session with scrutiny might be helpful towards it.

A Member asked that they be mindful that some Members were unable to make pre-meetings and his questions had been answered but with that in mind, he enquired if the Chief Executive thought it would be a useful opportunity to look at Councillors' meetings as well. For example, meetings that run into the evening can be difficult for some people and could be an opportunity to streamline meetings that they have already.

The Chief Executive advised that one of the things Group Leaders had raised was potentially about the Constitution and the things that are included in a Council meeting, such as announcements, the debate and trying to make those meetings more meaningful and interactive. He advised there was a review ongoing of the Constitution that may apply more for the next administration post May.

The Chief Executive advised that some Members have the same challenges as many of the officers in terms of their other responsibilities be that children or care responsibilities, so he felt the goal would be to move to a situation where most meetings could either be accessed online or in person and it would be a personal choice however they were not there yet for the bigger meetings, which would require investment in the Chamber, but for him it would be a modern 21<sup>st</sup> Century solution where if it was inconvenient to attend a meeting in person you they could do some from home, although he understood that would not suit all Members and in that case they could attend in person as they had previously done. He had no control over the length of meetings, as it would be dependent on the level and length of the debate.

The Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services confirmed they were working towards a hybrid solution and then would be a matter of Members choosing for themselves. She appreciated that last month's Council meeting had been long and difficult for all the people on the call. She advised that an email would be sent to all Members when the next Council Agenda was published to try and make the process

smoother in terms of when being allowed into the meeting, giving apologies, arriving in the meeting and not telling the Chair or Democratic Services that they have arrived or leaving. With regard to the length of the meeting she agreed with the Chief Executive that it would be in the Members' hands, they were trying to be an open and transparent organisation and want the public to be engaged with what they were doing and if Members have an item that is important to them and the public, then as officers they would not want to stop that debate, it needed to be debated for as long as they thought appropriate. Moving forward the Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services would be sitting on a national group where they would be looking to review the Constitution and there were some requirements in the new legislation which meant they had to have a Constitution that was fit for purpose and that would be reviewed nationally but they also had to have an easy read guide to the Constitution so there was work ongoing to develop those two documents, with a view to them being in place by May. For the new administration in May and the new Members they would be looking at doing a schedule of meetings and again giving Members the option for earlier or later meetings, which they would implement what is agreed by the majority of Members.

The Member expressed he was pleased Member diversity was being taken into consideration. The Member referred to the earlier discussion regarding potential shared workspaces for officers to use another Council's offices. and he thought it was interesting and wondered if there had been any conversations with the Welsh Local Government Association for example in that area of work. He also made the point that less people travelling from another County into work could save carbon emissions particularly on their trunk and main roads. The Member enquired as to the profile of their officers and if it was a similar picture whereby a lot of people commuted from neighbouring authorities.

The Chief Executive advised although he did not have those statistics to hand, most employees live locally in Bridgend, however they did bring in a fair amount of people from neighbouring authorities and vice versa. He emphasised that suggestion was utopia, and he did not think they were at the point yet where they could open up shared spaces and access each other's IT systems and would require some work between the relevant IT departments. However equally it should not be on the backburner in terms of trying to come up with a solution moving forward that would work in that way, but they were not there yet.

The Group Manager Human Resources and Organisational Development advised it was fair to say that along their salary scale that there was a line midpoint where the most people who are travelling are on the upper levels, but she would be able to get that information to present for the future. Although she did not have it to hand it would be something they would be looking at in terms of expenses and the costs, analysis, benefits and potential savings when they go into more detailed work around the project.

A Member referred to the Chief Executive stating it was not just them as a local authority but all twenty-two across Wales, right across the public sector and to varying degrees as opposed to the private sector although there was a call back to the office in some cases. He agreed that culture change on this scale would take time to bring forward and they would have to see what happened alongside continual monitoring and evaluation. He believed it would be the direction of travel in terms of hybrid model of working and from his own day job they had removed clock watching in favour of an outcomes-based approach and he believed it had increased productivity and morale across the board but obviously there were caveats to that. The Member enquired on the balance of mental health of their employees and innovation, being stuck looking at a screen for long periods of time could be exhausting both physically and psychologically which was probably shared by a number of officers throughout the authority. He queried what was being done to consider the mental health of officers, equally and in balance with that, he

wondered about ingenuity and innovation. He continued that you could not plan for innovation and if they were out of the office the corridor conversations were not taking place and he worried that may get lost if they were planning meetings. The Member was pleased that the report took account of the impact on town centres more broadly, there would have been hundreds of staff based at Civic Offices who would have been buying lunch/food from independent retailers and it would have been a major boost to the economy. His concern was focused on Bridgend town centre and the negative impact and the independent retailers would need all the support they could get after the most awful eighteen months.

The Chief Executive referred to the Member touching on culture change and in terms of the operating model they could set the parameters and broad terms the way in which they think the organisation would work but some of the other things that will emerge he believed would be more organic. For example, he explained there had already been teams or groups (two or three) of individuals who had taken it upon themselves to meet for coffees, not the Civic Offices but in various places around Bridgend or wherever. These would then be the creative places where people are having those conversations as the Member had described. He advised that those were the things he thought the organisation missed the most, not the formal meetings but in fact informally they would have had the opportunity to support, speak to someone briefly to flag something up and therefore perhaps when then had come to the Agenda item in the formal meeting it would not be completely cold. He believed this would be something that they would not be able to put into place, would happen organically and teams or managers would find their own ways of trying to fill the gaps.

The Chief Executive advised that the Member's second point was a critical one and would possibly require some intervention, although it was not there yet but there was that fatigue of literally being online in virtual meetings back to back all day. Again this would depend on your job as it how often this happened, but the Chief Executive knew personally unless he is careful one meeting would roll into another and there was not the benefit of being able to walk to the next meeting like in the Civic Offices which would have given you a break. He advised that they may have to think about that and intervene, possibly limiting screen time, or automatic five to ten minute breaks, he expressed that he did not have all the solutions, but he understand the point and it was certainly one of the things they would think about moving forward.

The Chief Executive advised regarding the Member's point about reduced footfall in the Town Centre, he was acutely aware that they were talking potentially amongst people who generally would be supportive of the direction of travel they were going but there would be a cohort of people that perhaps be less enthused about it. He felt the broad thing he could say, empathetically, was that regardless of what the Council did the town centre traders would need to adapt regardless in terms of the different environment they were having to work, so although the Council's staff are an important part of their business it would not be just them and there was scarcely any public or indeed private organisation that was not reviewing the way in which they work and whether they needed to be in the office as often. He explained that there would be a challenge anyway for the town centre traders to adapt and if that means they need to invest in online solutions or operate in a different way, then their role as a Council was supportive to them about how they could make those changes and be fit for purpose moving forward. He hoped not to come across too harsh as the Council were doing everything it could to support the town traders in terms of the car park offer, the rental concession and a range of other things. However, they did need to accept and acknowledge that things had changed on a national basis over the last eighteen months and therefore it required business as well to look at how they could adapt and be different moving forward. He concluded that there were specific officers looking into how they could help moving forward but he did not think realistically they would not be able to compel staff to

go into the office and act as they did before. It was a complex piece and he wanted them to acknowledge they were absolutely on it the best they could be, but he believed it was not just a Council responsibility that there had to be something there as well about how they help and support traders to operate in a different way moving forward.

The Committee made the following Recommendations:

1. A summary of the actions that have emerged from the Project Board meetings to be sent to Members including ongoing meetings going forward.
2. A copy of the business cases that will emerge through work stream feeds, to be shared, as and when available.
3. Statistics to be supplied in relation to the profile of the workforce.

Members highlighted the importance of Member engagement in the process and felt it should be seeking consultation and engagement with Members as the project moves forward.

43. **UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE SHARED REGULATORY SERVICE**

The Head of the Shared Regulatory Service gave a presentation on the work of the Service over the past eighteen months. He advised that the Shared Regulatory Service had been previously set up by the three Councils at a time they were struggling to delivery their Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing Service in the light of some quite challenging budget pressures. He explained the collaborative idea is unique in Wales in the way they work. He explained they had set five priorities which he ran through as part of the presentation along with their vision in 2015. He advised that in March 2020 when lockdown commenced and people could only leave their homes for limited purposes, this began a new series of events for the Shared Regulatory Service, as they had the public health responsibility of the Local Authority for Bridgend and the Public Health Act. Since March 2020 they had aligned their resources into three key workstreams: Test Trace and Protect, Covid Enforcement and Advice and Nuisance and Community matters, along with continuing to undertake interventions on high-risk issues, food hygiene and housing.

The Head of the Shared Regulatory Service presented a timeline for the Service over the last eighteen months through the pandemic, described the other areas still being worked on and looked into, the enforcement approach and improvement and closure notices that had been served. Away from the coronavirus issues the Shared Regulatory Service had been in the Crown Court a lot in 2021 as the Courts had started to deal with the backlog of work. While the Service had a lot of people working in TTP and with the Police on Coronavirus enforcement, he assured the Committee that Food Safety and Public Health Work had continued with a number of interventions in Bridgend town centre. He advised that empty property work and animal welfare work had continued. He explained that they were measuring how the service was performing and drew attention to the extremely capable group of officers working in the Team all of whom wanted to do a good job. He concluded that their challenges continued with resources reducing and the need to prioritise and he would work with the Chief Executive and the Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services to understand what Bridgend needed as a priority to deliver services.

A Member expressed what a phenomenal job they had been doing with visiting all the premises and going above and beyond their previous roles and was reassured about the ongoing food safety and public health work. She asked for reassurance that the

continuing issue of horses in the local area and problems with plastic burning constantly in a rural area. would continue to be addressed, to protect animals.

The Head of the Shared Regulatory Service provided assurance that the work was ongoing, and the issues would continue to be addressed. He explained that work around noise and pollution issues had escalated as people stayed home and experienced noisy / annoying neighbours and following intervention threats to Officers had also increased. He expressed that the joint enforcement team of the Police had been one way they were addressing this.

A Member referring to business investigations for non-compliance of Covid measures was pleased to see that the philosophy was to provide advice and education before financial penalties, however there would be some occasions when they would have to enforce financial penalties and he wondered when these were incurred to what extent was that information shared with other colleagues in the Council e.g. Business Grants Team, as he felt it would be unacceptable for those that had been non-compliant to get grants ahead of those that had not been.

The Head of the Shared Regulatory Service advised that their philosophy had been to start with advice and then move to persuasion as the regulatory controls move through different levels, and the alert levels changed and it had been difficult for the enforcement agency to understand those changes and embed them, and for the business community. Where there had been persistent poor practice, they would impose penalties and every time they had intervened, they had publicised the actions they took against those businesses on the SRS website, as required by law. He advised that pre-lockdown they had more interaction with colleagues in the Council, however since operating remotely they may be a gap to examine and address.

The Member referred to the empty property work which he presumed had been to provide residential accommodation and asked were there any incentives for people to bring those empty properties back into habitable use. He added that pre-pandemic he did not recall ever having to make any referrals for rats and vermin, but since lockdown he had made quite a few. It had been explained to him that one of the reasons had been due to a lot of the town centre cafes, bars and restaurants had closed down and the rats had gone further afield to find their food, and he asked whether as places had opened back up was the latest number of complaints still as high.

The Head of the Shared Regulatory Service advised that Pest Control was delivered through a contract arrangement with the Mighty Organisation, and he did not have that information. During lockdown they did see an increase in complaints associated with premises not being used, nature reclaiming them and reports of rats in and around those types of premises, so they would look at that under the Prevention of Damage by Pest Act. With regard to the empty homes there was a complete package put together with their input primarily being the law enforcement. The Council made packages available to bring these properties back into reuse. He expressed they were an important element in terms of not just giving people homes but improving the appearance of local communities. He commented that local investment and local businesses being more likely to come into the area if it looks like a nicer place and empty homes were often a blight on that appearance.

The Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services advised that for Bridgend Pest Control did not sit within the Shared Regulatory Service and advised that there had been a recent report to Cabinet as the contract was due for renewal.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations advised that on the website there were a range of support packages for people with empty properties. She explained

that last month she had announced in the Council meeting with regard to getting private landlords to rent to them which was something they had done if people were struggling to rent their property. She advised there were also lots of grants available. She clarified that the report to Cabinet regarding Pest Control had been in September.

A Member thanked the team for the support to their communities through what must have been a horrendous time for them all. He explained that one slide in the presentation had indicated the number of improvement notices served in the County Borough of Bridgend exceeded the number of notices served in Cardiff. He continued that when you considered scale it may have suggested some form of disproportion and would there have been a particular reason behind that. The Member also queried with so much multi-discipline responsibility that they had, so many competing priorities how they assessed demand in terms of business continuity and how are they able to fulfil their obligations to all those disciplines at a time when there would be many competing priorities.

The Head of the Regulatory Service advised there were times when they had felt they were being pulled in many directions which was why they continued to have a dialogue about what Bridgend needed and why they have dialogue with the Welsh Government and Westminster Government about their priorities. It would then be a process of rationalising and determining where they could have the most impact and provide the greatest benefits. Their Coronavirus work they were clear they needed to be in and around the care homes, as the most vulnerable in the community, they were clear they needed to help the Health and Safety Team around schools, the vulnerable young people there and the potential to limit and spread of the virus. Food has an immediate effect on our health he continued, housing was a more insidious slow creep, that if they did not deal with poor quality housing then people's lifespans could be reduced quite significantly. He advised it was a constant reassessment of the need and where they could have most impact and where their resource would be best placed. With regard to the number of notices in Bridgend he advised there were three officers, one covers Bridgend, one the Vale and one Cardiff who meet regularly and seek to be consistent in their application and respond to what they have found. He continued that he had not expected there to be a uniform of notices, Bridgend had been slightly higher but that reflected what was found and the response from some of the businesses with a number of them challenging what those notices asked of them. He was confident that a good job had been done and would not draw too much from the notices, he believed that what they would eventually see would be a reasonably good compliant business community taking its responsibility seriously.

The Member advised he was reassured in terms of the disproportionate number and he was interested in what local assessments are undertaken before they engage with SRS.

A Member gave thanks for all the work prior to Covid and throughout and asked with regard to the current situation with TTC how pubs were responding and dealing with things. He gave two examples of going into pubs where in one there were 100 people and no masks but in contrast visiting another for lunch and masks being worn and track and trace details logged. The Member's concern was that there was obviously still confusion on how pubs and clubs are dealing with it and tracking people.

The Head of the Regulatory Service advised that the law required businesses to take reasonable measures to prevent the spread of the virus from / in their premises, as the infection rate rose, the reasonable measures changed from when the infection rate had been lower. One of those measures had been to collect details of who was on the premises, although he advised not all businesses do it, and the challenge they would have would be at what point would they think the business had become unreasonable in not doing certain things and would they need to intervene. The Head of the Regulatory

Service expressed that the absurdities of controls where people were now allowed quite close interaction with no face masks and yet when entering a shop there was still a requirement to wear one. It was a policy issue under regular review by Welsh Government.

A Member praised the Team as all his communication had received timely, effective, helpful and sympathetic responses. He had also been frequently updated without having to press on some of the more complex issues, as a referrer on many issues in their domain and as someone associated with the community centre who had to negotiate the complexities of particularly Covid requirements and the multiple activities within that community centre.

The Head of the Regulatory Service expressed that community centres were interesting last year as they had anomalies of thirty people being able to go in and do an exercise class, but you could not have five young children practice their recorders or brass band instruments and they had done their best to try and communicate that through.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations wanted to thank the Committee for all their positive comments. She was aware that SRS was not often an attendee in Bridgend Committees. She also wanted to put on record her thanks to the staff at SRS who had gone across to help the pandemic response on the TTC side of things. She explained that the staff had had to pick up a lot as mentioned previously, the SRS trained their staff well and a lot of work had gone on behind the scenes to make sure that the performance had not dipped. She advised that they did need to be mindful as recruitment was an issue across the Local Authority.

The Head of the Regulatory Service advised that Cardiff Metropolitan University was the university that trained Environmental Health Officers and that numbers on the course had dwindled significantly over recent years, but as part of their efforts to deal with the coronavirus challenges and continue the work that they are tasked with they recruited 25-30 of those students over the months to help with that work. As officers had left the permanent work force some of those students had joined them permanently, so there was a flow of staff into the organisation to train and develop. He admitted it was an ongoing challenge to get young people into the service and to get them the skills that they needed, and they were keen to recruit the right kinds of individuals that could engage with the community. She thanked the Head of the Regulatory Service for doing an outstanding job.

The Committee made the following Recommendations:

1. Have a written response in relation to how priorities are assessed locally to engage the services of SRS.
2. Members enquired about further information as to whether there had been an increase in the volumes of rats in order to determine if this was a local issue.

Members recommended the sharing of data internally, in respect of the awarding of grants, for non-compliant businesses.

#### 44. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Scrutiny Officer advised that following on from Members' consideration of the Forward Work Programme at the last meeting in September, the updated Forward Work Programme for this committee was attached as Appendix A and the Forward Work Programmes for Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committees 1, 2 and 3 were also

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attached as Appendices B, C and D, because this committee had responsibility for coordination and oversight of the overall Forward Work Programme.

She also advised that the Recommendations Monitoring Action Sheet was attached as Appendix E to track responses to the Committee's recommendations at the previous meetings.

A Member mentioned that when looking at Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> December on the Forward Work Programme there was quite a lot on the Agenda for one meeting and felt that things may be overlooked if there was too much on the agenda to go through. The Chair queried with the Scrutiny Officer whether the Budget report would be available for that meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that due to the lateness of the Local Government Finance Settlement it was likely that the scrutiny of the Budget would move from December to January so some of those reports would be moved to January for consideration as a result, which should reassure Members regarding the size of the December Agenda.

### Recommendation:

Having considered the Forward Work Programme, the Committee requested that a report upon Shared Workspace 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 latest respective 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.

### 45. URGENT ITEMS

None