

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

SUBJECT: ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL - 24TH SEPTEMBER, 2020

REPORT OF:

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR M. MOORE (CHAIR)

Councillors J. Holt (Deputy Chair)
P. Baldwin
D. Bevan
J. Collins
M. Cook
M. Cross
N. Daniels
D. Davies
G. A. Davies
M. Day
P. Edwards
L. Elias
D. Hancock
K. Hayden
S. Healy
J. Hill
W. Hodgins
J. Mason
H. McCarthy
C. Meredith
J. Millard
J. C. Morgan
J. P. Morgan
L. Parsons
K. Pritchard
K. Rowson
T. Sharrem
T. Smith
B. Summers
G. Thomas

S. Thomas
H. Trollope
J. Wilkins
B. Willis
L. Winnett

WITH:

Managing Director
Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Corporate Director of Education (Interim)
Chief Officer Resources
Chief Officer Commercial
Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
Head of Governance & Partnerships
Service Manager Performance & Democratic
Service Manager Development & Estates
Communications, Marketing & Customer Access Manager
Team Manager – Building Control and Development Plans

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<p><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
No. 2	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, M. Holland, G. Paulsen and B. Thomas.</p>	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS</u></p>	

Congratulations

- Congratulations were extended to Mrs Glenys Weston of Ebbw Vale who would be celebrating her 100th birthday on 10th October, 2020.

RESOLVED that an appropriate letter be sent.

Condolences

- Condolences were expressed to the family and friends of Sir Simon Boyle KCVO, Lord Lieutenant of Gwent 2001-2016 who died peacefully at home on 4th September 2020 aged 79.

Members and officers marked this sad occasion with a brief silence as a mark of respect.

It was noted that a condolence letter had been sent on behalf of Members and officers of the authority.

No. 5

MINUTE BOOK - FEBRUARY - SEPTEMBER 2020

The Minute Book for the period February – September 2020 was submitted for consideration, whereupon:

Item No. 17 - Special Regeneration Scrutiny Committee – 8th September, 2020

A Member said that there had been a considerable amount of confusion at the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee yesterday at which, the above-named minutes were considered. In the main, this confusion and lack of understanding related to the systems and processes to deal with minutes at a ‘Special Committee’. He had checked previous Committees including Special Executive but was unable to identify any other meeting where this process had occurred and said that clarification on this matter should be sought prior to the minutes being accepted.

In addition, concern had been raised regarding the balance and

reflection of debate captured within the minutes of the final exempt item, as no mention had been made to points raised regarding the viability around asbestos removal and the condition of building. There had also been a request made that when the item was considered by the Executive Committee (this happened to be an hour following the Scrutiny Committee had concluded), that the views of the Scrutiny Committee were conveyed together with a request that the report remain in an exempt status until these matters had been addressed. He concluded by reiterating that clarification on these matters should be sought prior to the minutes being accepted and that he would personally be unable to accept the minutes in their current format.

The Chair pointed out that it was her understanding that Members of the Scrutiny Committee had taken a vote on this particular set of minutes and they had been accepted as a true record of the proceedings. The Member advised that it was his understanding that the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee would meet the Leader and Deputy Leader to discuss the matter further.

The Head of Governance and Partnerships reminded Council that a request that had previously been made by Members for sets of minutes to be submitted to the next available Scrutiny Committee for consideration, wherever this was possible and this included 'Special' Committees.

The Chair of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee confirmed that there had been no confusion about the minutes, the Advisor had confirmed that it was in order for minutes to be presented to a Special Committee for consideration.

The Leader of the Labour Group said for the same reason outlined by his colleague, he was also unable to accept the minutes and expressed his concern at the speed at which the set of minutes had been produced and also that the scrutiny process had been ridden across as a result.

The Leader of the Council advised that he was confused as to where the scrutiny process had been 'ridden' across because

exactly the same principle had happened on the previous Monday with regard to the Wood Facility report. He explained that this process took place where there were contentious issues or issues that were beneficial to the authority that needed to be progressed. With regard to the report relating to the Pithead Baths, a business plan would be looked at to ascertain if it was feasible to resolve a problem that had been in existence for over 30 years and having the capability to act in a speedy manner would allow officers to move the process on more quickly. With regard to the Wood Facility report, the Corporate Director had actually been contacted by Welsh Government to thank the authority for acting quickly, because this would allow the project to progress.

The Leader continued by stating that whether the Executive had taken place 1 hour or 2 weeks after the scrutiny process, the process was exactly the same and the Constitution stipulated that when the Executive needed to consider at item, this should be done as quickly and reasonably as possible. Therefore, whilst the Executive was being criticised for speeding up the process, he pointed out that the scrutiny process had not been negated in any way.

The Leader of the Labour Group clarified that he was referring to the 'call in' process because as soon as Executive Committee had concluded, the Executive Member had issued a statement on social media and to the press which totally rode against 'call in'. Scrutiny Committee Members should have had been provided with time to reflect on the recommendation they had made – therefore, the 'call in' process (which was for a period of 5-days) had been totally routed because the information was provided immediately to the press and this could be perceived as a 'done deal'.

The Leader of the Council advised that the 'call in' process remained in place and it was not improper to release a positive story to the press, the content of which would have been authorised prior to its release. He pointed out that if a 'call in' had been required or had taken place and some other decision had been made during that period, a contrary statement would have been issued to the press. He concluded by stating whilst the decision making had been speeded up, the scrutiny process was absolutely not being undermined.

The Leader of the Labour Group pointed out that an additional 5 days would not have made a difference and as courtesy to Scrutiny Members they should have been provided with time to reflect on the recommendation made. Therefore, for this reason i.e. the way in which the scrutiny process had been cut across, he would not be supporting acceptance of these minutes.

A Member said he was concerned about the options put forwarded at the meeting and an additional recommendation had been made that the site owner should be made accountable for the cost of asbestos removal and other items before it became public knowledge and progressed to the next stage. However, this information had not appeared in the minutes from the Executive Committee. He expressed his concern that the decision had been rushed through the process and reiterated that he was unable to support acceptance of the minutes.

Another Member said that he felt that there were double standards operating and made reference to the discussions at the previous Council meeting regarding the disclosure of exempt information. He also concluded by stating that he was unable to support approval of this set of minutes.

A Member said that he had actually proposed that the preferred option be endorsed at the Scrutiny Committee and if any Member had not wished to support this proposal, they could have made an amendment at that juncture.

The Leader of the Council said the debate was now progressing into the realms of legalities. The main difference between the press release and that which occurred previously at Council was that a full confidential report had been released to outside bodies that contained commercially sensitive information. The press release that had been issued in respect of the Pithead Baths had not contained commercially sensitivity information and the Executive Member and Communications Team would have sought approval from the Legal Department before this information had been released.

The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance commenced by advising that she was aware of correspondence that had been exchanged between the Leader of the Labour Group and Managing Director relating to issues around exempt items – there was some confusion what exempt items were and their status and the intertwined rules of confidentiality too. The officer advised that she was in the process of preparing a briefing note for all Members to advise on the issue of exempt items. However, this did not mean that because a report was exempt that it could not be discussed at all. An exemption applied to members of the public and press but clearly did not apply to internal dialogue and discussions and once a decision had been made then a managed press release was often appropriate to set out to the public and press the Council's intentions.

Regarding the approval of minutes, the officer confirmed that once minutes had been submitted to either a special or scheduled Scrutiny Committee they would be submitted to Council for ratification which was the current process. It was understood that a vote had been taken at the Scrutiny Committee and had been carried. The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance acknowledged that a number of Members wanted their objection recorded against the minutes but advised she was unsure what the basis of the objection was - if the minutes were factually incorrect, Members should set out what the factual inaccuracies were.

In reply to a question when an exempt item was not an exempt item, the Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance confirmed that the report was exempt from press and public view at a point in time but reiterated that this did not mean that the topic itself should not necessarily be discussed – it was noted that a topic needed to be discussed for a project to be progressed. She concluded by advising that she would circulate a note to all Members on this matter as soon as possible and convene a short MS Teams session at that time.

Councillors J. C. Morgan, H. Trollope and S. Thomas requested that their names be recorded against the decision to accept the above-named set of minutes – Item No. 17 – Special Regeneration

	Scrutiny Committee – 8 th September, 2020. RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the minutes be approved and confirmed as a true record of proceedings.	
No. 6	<u>ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL</u> Agreed.	
No. 7	<u>PLANNING, REGULATORY AND GENERAL LICENSING COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 8	<u>EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 9	<u>SPECIAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 10	<u>SPECIAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 11	<u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 12	<u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 13	<u>EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 14	<u>COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 15	<u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u>	

	Agreed.	
No. 16	<u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 17	<u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Agreed.	
No. 18	<u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u> Councillors J. C. Morgan, H. Trollope and S. Thomas requested that their names be recorded against the decision to accept the above-named set of minutes. It was RESOLVED subject to the foregoing, that the minutes be agreed.	
No. 19	<u>MEMBERS QUESTIONS</u> There were no questions submitted by Members.	
No. 20	<u>PUBLIC QUESTIONS</u> There were no questions submitted by members of the public.	
No. 21	<u>TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REVIEW 1ST APRIL 2019 TO 31ST MARCH 2020</u> Members considered the report of the Chief Officer Resources. At the invitation of the Chair, the Chief Officer Resources spoke briefly to the report, which provided the opportunity to Members to review the Treasury Management activities carried out during 2019/2020. Reference was made to Table 5.1.6 which provided a summary of the activities and Members were advised that a copy of the full annual report was available at appendix 1. During 2019/2020 the authority had taken £10m long term public debt from other public authorities and despite the financial climate the authority had performed well in terms of its investments, seeing returns of	

£61,000 achieved with an average interest rate of 0.46%. Whilst, this was slightly lower than the benchmark rate of 0.54% it reflected the fact that the Authority could not invest in counterparties that paid higher rates due to credit rating reductions. This was, however, in line with the Authority's risk averse policy whereby the security of the capital sum was the number one priority at the expense of more competitive returns.

The Chief Officer continued by advising that an average interest rate of 1.09% had been paid on temporary borrowings, against a benchmark of 1.00% minimising as far as possible the interest payable by the Authority. This was despite the impact (increase) in market rates following the 1.00% increase to PWLB rates in October 2019 and had an impact on market rates. This could, therefore, be evidenced of good performance.

All of the treasury limits and treasury management prudential indicators set for the financial year had been complied with during the year and no institutions in which investments were made during the period had any difficulty in repaying investments and interest in full, so the Authority had, therefore, not been exposed to any financial loss as a result of the difficult economic climate.

The Chief Officer concluded by advising that Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee had considered the report on 11th September, 2020 and had endorsed Option 1.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the treasury management activity undertaken during the 2019/20 financial year be noted and the record of performance and compliance achieved during the 2019/20 financial year be accepted.

No. 22 **COMMERCIAL STRATEGY**

The report of the Chief Officer Commercial was submitted for consideration.

The Chief Officer Commercial presented the Commercial Strategy for 2020 – 2025 which had received both Scrutiny and Executive approval in February and March but unfortunately, Council consideration of the strategy had been delayed due to the impact

Covid-19 pandemic.

It was noted that many of the intentions and ambitions within the strategy had remained a focus as the Council looked to become a more commercially minded organisation and this fitted with the ambition to be an 'ambitious and innovative Council delivering quality services that matters to our communities'. There were a number of critical themes contained within the document and these were highlighted at paragraph 2.2 of the report.

In addition, there were a number of related strategies and programmes that would contribute to the delivery of the Commercial Strategy, all of which had been impacted by the events of Covid-19 and these included:

- A Communications Strategy 2020 – 2025
- A Digital and Customer Transformation Programme
- The Workforce Strategy

Members were advised that there were five specific commercial ambitions which were detailed at paragraph 2.4 of the report. These ambitions would be governed through a newly created Strategic Commissioning and Commercial Board, which was in the process of being established. This would replace the Strategic Procurement Board and the Procurement and Commissioning Cycle would be strengthened to support the new Board which would also have a role reviewing the delivery of Service Level Agreements to schools, monitoring commercial viability of traded services and in governing investment options using an investment framework.

Each of the five commercial ambitions had a set of actions that made up a programme of work which would be scrutinised over the next five years. The following amendment was, thereupon, made to paragraph 2.6 of the report namely, that reporting on the delivery of the work programme would be undertaken on a quarterly basis via Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee (not annually as reported) and would be considered by Council on an annual basis.

RESOLVED accordingly.

The Chief Officer Commercial concluded by outlining the options contained with the report.

The Leader of the Labour Group requested that Members be provided with a full list of consultants that had been commissioned over the last 2 years together with the expenditure incurred for each commission.

It was unanimously,

FUTHER RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Commercial Strategy and associated work programme be agreed.

No. 23

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial.

The Chief Officer Commercial advised that this strategy had been considered by both Scrutiny and Executive during the spring but had been delayed being considered by Council due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A number of the aspirations were contained within the strategy which had been escalated over the last 6 months. The importance and the power of the social media at such a difficult time in being able to release key messages at speed to residents and being able to respond to requests for information during a time of emergency had been recognised. It was noted that digital and social media were very powerful tools and provided a two-way communication process for the Council and its residents.

The overall objective of the strategy as detailed in paragraph 2.4 of the report was to deliver excellent, innovative and cost effective two-way communications, building a positive reputation and increasing trust and confidence that the Council was delivering services that met residents, businesses and visitor's needs.

Much of the information gathered to provide the content of communications had been gathered from regular attendance at Directorate Management Team meetings and the Communications Team was working closely with each director to identify early engagement with services on managing communication campaigns and opportunities.

There were six ambitions or themes which would drive the

communications delivery led by the Corporate Communications Team and these were outlined in paragraph 2.6 of the report. Each of these ambitions had a set of actions that made up a programme of work which would be scrutinised over the next five years. The following correction was made to paragraph 2.7 of the report namely that, reporting on the delivery of the work programme would be undertaken on a quarterly basis via Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee (not annually as reported) and would be reported into Council on an annual basis.

RESOLVED accordingly.

The Chief Officer Commercial concluded by outlining the options for recommendation contained in paragraph 3 of the report.

Use of Digital Communication Channels – a Member expressed his concern that the Council's reputation in terms of communications with the public was 'shot' at this time. Residents who tried to telephone into the contact centre had an average wait time of between 45 minutes to an hour and the self-service 'app' did not always work effectively at all times.

Support for Elected Members and Staff - the Leader of the Labour Group commended the strategy and said that he had seen an improvement in communications in the last few years. The plan as outlined in paragraph 2.5 also aimed to support Members and staff but pointed out that there was an onus on Members, particularly lead Members to speak up for the Council. He relayed a conversation that had taken place with a journalist from BBC Radio Wales asking for him to comment on the impending local restrictions and had been advised by the journalist that leading Members had not been willing to participate. He said that this was not good enough during these dire times – there was an onus on Members of the Council and in particular, the leadership to communicate.

Agenda Paperwork - another Member expressed his concern that he had not had sight of the reports being discussed at this meeting and said that as the Council was currently operating remotely it was essential that Members were provided with this information. He pointed out that the ICT provision was inadequate and unreliable. The Chair confirmed that Members had access to the information a week before the meeting took place.

Communications - a Member commenced by stating that she was aware that these were dire times and that services were extremely stretched but said that if there were serious issues happening within wards and the County Borough, then Members should be kept updated and be provided with this information immediately – the Member gave the example whereby a local school had been closed in her ward and she had been bombarded by residents with concerns. A further incident related to a Corporate Communication message which was published before parents were appraised of the situation the head teacher.

The Member continued by stating that Members were elected to work on behalf the public and should, therefore, be kept abreast and fully informed of anything that was happening particularly in their individual wards and the borough. Members could then relay this information onto concerned parents which would subsequently prevent an influx of calls to the Council. The Member concluded by stating that she had put the concerns relating to school communications and was awaiting a response from officers.

Another Member stressed the importance of legal notices being communicated to the public e.g. planning applications as more and more people were moving to the internet to access this type of information. In addition, he said that the website should also contain new stories and it was important that the website was accessible not just from desktops and mobile devices but that it worked in conjunction with the current ‘app’ in order that news could be delivered to the residents in this format.

Leader of the Council’s Response - The Leader of the Council agreed with the comments made by the Leader of the Labour Group and said that if requests were made to Members to make statements to the press then they should do so. With regard to the BBC Radio Wales interview, he confirmed that he had only received one request from the Communications Team to make a comment following a meeting that had taken place with three other Leaders involved in lockdown situation and Welsh Government Ministers but unfortunately, he had been involved in a further meeting directly thereafter and there had been a deadline for responses to be received by.

With regard to the comments made around communications he said that whilst he agreed to a certain extent, he could not agree that the whole of communications were ‘shot’ – this was a strong

word and whilst there some aspects that needed improvement, to brand all of communications as 'shot' was absolutely wrong. Whilst he shared similar concerns with regard to the area referred to, this would form part of the review that the Chief Officer Commercial would be undertaking to improve certain areas. A great deal of emphasis and focus had been put on communications and engagement over the last few years and this had been particularly good in some areas – the strategy would address those areas most in need of improvement and hopefully during the coming months and years, Members and residents would witness those required improvements.

The Member referred to his earlier comments and advised that he was relaying the concerns of residents and for clarity had said that 'particular' areas of communications were 'shot' and not the whole of communications. Residents were not contacting the Council via the telephone due to the considerable amount of waiting time. He concluded by stating that he believed that in the eyes of the public, the reputation of communications had diminished.

The Corporate Director of Education (Interim) advised that the Council was clearly in an emergency response situation and the Education and Communications Teams were doing their absolute utmost to communicate in what was a very dynamic position to key stakeholders regarding the school closure situation. Also he pointed out schools were key partners in distributing messages to parents and it was in their hands to release that information.

In relation to the school referred to, he advised Members of the reason why there had been a slight delay of between 10-15 minutes for the Head releasing the information to parents. With regard to the original request that had been received in relation to the Council's approach to responding to Members regarding school closures, this was due to be discussed at CLT who wanted to take a consistent approach going forward in circumstances that may arise in the future and he would respond to the Member accordingly.

It was unanimously,

FURTHER RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Communications Strategy and associated work programme be agreed.

<p>No. 24</p>	<p><u>STRATEGIC EQUALITY PLAN 2020 TO 2024</u></p> <p>The report of the Head of Governance and Partnerships was submitted for consideration.</p> <p>The Head of Governance and Partnerships commenced by advising that the Council had a statutory obligation to publish a Strategic Equality Plan. In addition to the specific duties which were set by the Equality Act (Statutory Duties) (Wales) (Regulations), Welsh Government was looking to commence a new Public Sector Equality Duty named the ‘socio-economic duty’ from September 2020 which needed to be incorporated into the Plan and monitored moving forward.</p> <p>The Equality Objectives were detailed within paragraph 2.7 of the report and the plan and supporting documents were contained within Appendix 1.</p> <p>A number of engagement methods had been used to gain views on the draft plan and 96 responses had been received as part of the formal consultation exercise which ran from December 2019 to January 2020. During both engagement phases the Children’s Grand Council, Youth Forum, 50+ Forum, and Blaenau Gwent People First Group were engaged and shoppers were surveyed across each of the town centres. Effective elected Member involvement had taken place via the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Working Group, which had met in September and November 2019 as part of the project plan.</p> <p>It was unanimously,</p> <p>RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely the Strategic Equality Plan 2020 – 2024 be approved, in line with the expectations of the specific duties of the Equality Act 2010</p>	
<p>No. 25</p>	<p><u>REPLACEMENT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN - REVISED DELIVERY AGREEMENT</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services.</p> <p>At the invitation of the Chair, the Team Manager – Building Control</p>	

and Development Plans spoke in detail to the report, the purpose of which was to seek approval for a Revised Delivery Agreement for preparing the replacement Local Development Plan together with a Covid-19 Assessment.

Section 2 of the report set out the reason why there had been a need to revise the Delivery Agreement and undertake a Covid-19 Assessment. It was noted that although the preparation of the Plan had been running 3 months behind schedule (this was within the 3-month slippage allowed for by the Delivery Agreement) good progress was being made. The Development Plans Team was preparing to go out for consultation on the 2nd Call for Candidate Sites and further information on existing sites, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

During early March, the Council had received correspondence from Welsh Government advising against proceeding with the plan as this was likely to be in conflict with legal requirements set out in Delivery Agreement Communities Involvement Scheme and therefore, the 2nd Call for Candidate Sites did not proceed and the plan was put on hold. A further letter was received from the Minister for Housing and Local Government in July advising to proceed but to proceed the Council needed to submit an amended Delivery Agreement to address Covid-19, social distancing and the delay together with a Covid-19 assessment.

The scope of the report was outlined in paragraph 2.12 and it was noted that the two documents requiring Council approval would also need to be submitted to Welsh Government for their approval prior to the work on the plan progressing.

It was noted that the Delivery Agreement timetable as a result of lockdown would be delayed by 7 months, with a further 2 weeks added for the consultation period for the deposit plan which would mean the plan would now be adopted in Autumn 2022 rather than March 2022 – the drop dead date for the current plan would be the end 2021, therefore, the Council would be without an LDP for a period of 10 months.

Methods to overcome social distancing issues were detailed within paragraph 2.15 of the report and such measures included longer consultation periods and pre-arranged appointments.

The Covid-19 Assessment document details were highlighted

within paragraphs 2.16 – 2.20 and the document provided an overview of the assessment of the evidence base and concluded that generally the evidence base was either as good as it could be due to the lack of new trend data or that it could be updated and would be used to inform the Deposit Plan. The strategy and objective of the plan was in line with Welsh Government aspirations outlined within the Building Better Places document.

It was noted that the strategic policies were found to be sufficiently flexible to deal with what were unknown times and providing a monitoring framework was put in place to reflect associated uncertainties, the Plan would be sufficiently robust whilst setting out a clear distinct vision of what was needed within Blaenau Gwent. The Team Manager concluded by confirming that the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee had supported Option 1.

Members were then given the opportunity to raise questions/comment in respect of the Revised Local Delivery Agreement.

A Member requested that his appreciation be put on record to the Team Manager and her team for the sterling work undertaken on the LDP over the last year and to date. The Leader of the Council endorsed the comments made.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development advised that an immense amount of work had been undertaken before and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and the team had done remarkable job. The situation changed daily and the plan had to be flexible for coming months and include changes such as the impact on the economy and changes in transport – it was noted that there were many elements that could affect the plan.

However, there were two main areas of importance i.e. potentially the 10 months that the Council could be without an LDP and work would be undertaken with officers and other councils to mitigate this in conjunction with the Welsh Government. In addition, with regard to enhanced costs due to Covid-19 there may be an opportunity for recompense. The Executive Member concluded by stating that Members would be updated and receive regular progress briefings.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Revised Delivery Agreement and Covid-19 Assessment Report be approved.

No. 26

DECARBONISATION PLAN 2020-2030

Members considered the report of the Managing Director.

The Managing Director spoke in detail to the report and highlighted the salient points contained therein. She explained that the first section of the report acknowledged that climate change was a global issue of significant importance and the plan set out a clear ambition and clear direction for Blaenau Gwent on how it could reduce climate change and become a carbon neutral Council by 2030. The plan also intended to support the delivery of the Welsh Government's vision of a low carbon Wales and called for public sector leadership and for the whole of public sector in Wales to become carbon neutral by 2030.

Members were advised that the Council was already working on initiatives and making investments to help reduce its carbon footprint and these were detailed in paragraph 2.4 of the report. Therefore, the Council was not starting from a position of 'no activity' and whilst good work had been done there was a considerable amount of work to do going forward. Good examples of what had been achieved so far included investment in 21st Century Schools providing more modern and efficient school infrastructure/buildings; moving towards a full low energy street lighting estate; waste management – reducing the amount of waste that went to landfill and the Refit programme – working with Welsh Government refitting buildings to make them more energy efficient. Details of the current carbon emission levels were provided within the appendix to the report.

The Managing Director continued by pointing out that paragraph 2.7 set out a number of the Council's operations where action could make a significant contribution towards the ambition of carbon neutrality and transitioning to and delivering a more efficient carbon neutral Council. Further work would be required to be undertaken and include areas such as transport and travel (including travel to work); procurement of goods and services; the purchase and use energy and heating of buildings and further work around waste and increasing recycling rates. In addition,

important work and mapping activity was currently being undertaken which would look at how land assets/holdings could be used to offset any carbon emissions – this was known as ‘sequestration’.

The Managing Director emphasised that the Decarbonisation Plan should not be seen as another new initiative or plan, it was an ambition about how the Council wanted to operate and it would underpin all service delivery and how services would be designed, developed and improved in the future. Members and officers would have to be mindful of the impact of future decision making and the effect this would have on the authority becoming carbon neutral.

Section 6 of the report highlighted the work and data evidence that backed up the plan including the elements of the carbon footprint. It was estimated on annual basis, the Council currently generated 71,330 tonnes of CO₂ as an organisation delivering its day to day operations and activity.

The report provided examples of this activity, with a large part of carbon emissions resulting as a consequence of the commute to work and officers driving around during the course of their daily activities. A recent exercise had evidenced a significant impact over the last 6 months, due to the change in working arrangements where officers were not commuting to work and travelling during the course of their duties. Prior to lockdown only 11% of potential commuting journeys were avoided due to homeworking but since lockdown this had risen to 80% as staff had been enabled to work from home. Based on an indicative estimate this represented a saving of 1,500 tonnes of carbon emissions in an entire year.

This demonstrated that an important factor of becoming a carbon neutral authority was about changing behaviours and how business was conducted and services delivered. If this positive behaviour could be embedded and built on going forward, this would be a significant step in achieving the Council’s ambition to become a carbon neutral authority.

The Managing Director concluded by advising that the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee had debated the plan and had endorsed Option 1.

Members were thereupon, provided with an opportunity raise questions/comment on the report.

The Leader of the Labour Group said that this was an excellent plan but on a note of caution said that whilst homeworking was now critical and vital, going forward conditions would need to be different because it must be realised that homeworking brought its own issues for example wellbeing and also had a knock on economic effect on town centres.

A Member shared a similar concern regarding homeworking and the difficulties encountered by the public regarding contacting the Council. There was also a major impact on town centres with business owners losing custom, particularly, with the current closure of the Civic Centre. In addition, the Member referred to the possibility of a further facility being located at Silent Valley which could potentially increase the number of vehicles that visited this site from outside of the County Borough and asked what impact and implications this would have for Blaenau Gwent becoming a carbon neutral authority in the future.

The Managing Director advised that the Council was operating in strange times and the Civic Centre had closed and officers were homeworking because this was quite clearly Welsh Government advice. She acknowledged that working arrangements had gone from one extreme to another i.e. from a position of largely office based staff with occasional homeworking to total homeworking with occasional office use. However, as part of the ambition, the Council could not revert back to the previous operating approach in future – it would be a balanced approach between office and homeworking which would counter some of the downsides to homeworking once the pandemic eased sufficiently. Work was being undertaken to ascertain how this could be facilitated but this had been slightly set back due to recent Welsh Government announcements.

In terms of the Council ambition to become carbon neutral, for this to be achieved every project that was developed or any improvements or changes made to service delivery would need to take account of the impact of carbon emissions going forward i.e. this needed to be considered as part of everything that the Council did.

Another Member referred to the infrastructure within the Council

Chamber and advised that she had been given an assurance pre Covid-19 by the Leader that the infrastructure in the Chamber would be upgraded to enable Members to be able to use their laptops in the venue but to date this had not been undertaken. There were still no electrical sockets in the venue and there were issues with accessing Wi-Fi. Also, as part of any future arrangements, there needed to be provision for Members to attend a meeting remotely, if so required. She expressed her concern that a considerable amount of money had been spent on modernising offices but the Chamber had been left behind and remained in the same condition as when the Civic Centre was originally constructed.

A Member said that this long term plan together with the Local Development Plan would be one of the cornerstones on which the County Borough would be built on in the future. He expressed his appreciation to the Managing Director for the work undertaken to date and commended the progress made.

Another Member agreed with the points raised regarding homeworking and that there needed to be a blended approach of both homeworking and office (similar to the way education was currently operating) because he was concerned that homeworking had potential knock on effects and disrupted the whole household. He pointed out that staff who were told to work from home were now entitled to claim £6 allowance per week to offset general expenses such utility bills.

The Executive Member – Regeneration & Economic Development echoed the comments made, that there had been a huge amount of work already undertaken but it was a developing plan and would change over time. He agreed with the blended approach referred to and said that discussions were already taking place with Trade Unions on this and work would also take place with partners to ensure the approach was correct going forward. This was a very challenging target but with the endorsement of the plan this could be realised over time.

He, thereupon, proposed that Option 1 be endorsed with addendum that the Council declare a climate emergency. It was noted that the Welsh Government was leading on this initiative and had asked local authorities to consider accordingly.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Decarbonisation Plan 2020 – 2030 be approved.

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Council declare a climate emergency.

No. 27 **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

Consideration was given to the report of the meeting held on 14th July, 2020.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted.

No. 28 **MEMBERSHIPS REPORT**

Consideration was given to:

Aneurin Bevan Community Health Council

- to appoint a replacement representative.

The Leader requested that expressions of interest be submitted if any Member was interested in taking up this vacant position.

Advisory Panel for Local Authority School Governors

The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 3rd August, 2020 to appoint:

Sofrydd Primary – Sian Barrett

Pen-y-Cwm – Hannah Williams

Deighton – Jaqueline Thomas

Glyncoed – Councillor Clive Meredith

It was further noted that the Panel had also recommended at this meeting the following appointments which had not be included within the Memberships Report:

Ystruth – Councillors G. Collier & L. Winnett

The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 14th September, 2020 to appoint:

Brynbach Primary – Gemma Badham

St. Illtyd's Primary – Lucy Allsopp

Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the above appointments be endorsed.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

RESOLVED to note:

The appointment of Councillor J. C. Morgan as Chair of the above Committee.

Councillor M. Cross to remain a Member of the Democratic Services Committee.

In reply to a question, the Head of Governance and Partnerships advised that she would shortly be meeting with the new Chair and anticipated that a Democratic Services Committee would convened in due course.

Councillor Cross outlined his reason for standing down as Chair of Democratic Services and expressed his appreciation to his both former Vice-Chairs Councillors Julie Holt and Jonathan Millard for the support they had provided to him in the past. He added that he was sure that Councillor Morgan would make a success of the role.

Councillor Morgan expressed his appreciation to Councillor Cross for all the work he had done in his role as Chair of the Committee and said that he would be a hard act to follow.

No. 29

EXEMPT ITEMS(S)

To receive and consider the following reports which in the opinion of the proper officer were exempt items taking into account consideration of the public interest test and that the press and public should be excluded from the meeting (the reasons for the decisions for the exemptions were available on a schedule

maintained by the proper officer).

No. 30 **FESTIVAL PARK UPDATE**

Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.

RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).

The report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services was submitted for consideration. It was noted that this item was for information purposes only.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Corporate Director spoke to the report, the purpose of which was to update Members with the progress made to date in respect of the Festival Park proposal. It was noted that a Festival Park Working Group had been established which had met on a number of occasions to consider the interrelated elements of this complex project. The Working Group had also engaged with relevant stakeholders as part of the project.

The Corporate Director advised that the work outlined in paragraph 2.5 of the report had now largely been completed and concluded by outlining the three options that would be detailed within the final business plan. This plan would also detail the benefits and dis-benefits of each option.

The views of Members were sought and were summarised below together with the responses provided by the Corporate Director:

- Concern was expressed that the discussions should have taken place at Council before an offer had been made to the agent. In addition, Members sought clarity on the value of the offer made and asked how the Council proposed to fund the offer if it was accepted.

The Corporate Director advised that he had been acting

under authorised delegated powers to progress the negotiation but the agent was fully aware that any offers made would be subject to Council and Welsh Government approval. He advised Members of the value of the offer and said that discussions were currently taking place with Welsh Government in relation to the funding methods at present.

The Leader of the Labour Group requested that the cost together with impact on wider priorities in the Regeneration Directorate be included within the business case. He requested an assurance that if the business case was accepted, that this would not be funded from the departmental budget and that other activities would not suffer as a consequence.

The Corporate Director advised that the business case would focus on the three options referred to earlier and would not relate to any other Council services and activities. He advised that the business case may demonstrate long term financial benefits but until the final business case was received he would be unable to comment further.

Another Member said he was concerned that the Council was not in a position to proceed because if the offer was accepted the Council would be relying on loans to fund it. He said that the business plan should have been approved before an offer had been formally made.

The Corporate Director advised that the Council had been open and transparent in its discussions with the agent, who was fully aware of the position that the Council was in i.e. that a decision would have to be made by Full Council and in addition, this would have to be considered by Welsh Government.

- Concern was expressed that the risks identified as part of implementing the scheme had not been detailed within the report.

The Corporate Director advised that the risks would be included as part of the business case going forward. He added that the agent had also been made fully aware of the risks involved.

- Another Member presumed that the current total costs for the consultants and building survey to date was over and above the original estimate that had been outlined in the report at the July meeting of the Council.

The Corporate Director advised Members of the cost of consultants and the building surveys which had needed to be completed as part of due diligence process. Detailed costs would be provided as part of the business case.

The Member expressed her concern that the sum referred to was over and above the sum agreed at the July Council and asked who had authorised this additional expenditure as she felt this was not acceptable.

The Corporate Director advised that he had used delegated powers to authorise this expenditure as part of the due diligence process.

- In reply to a concern raised relating to other expressions of interest and potential conflict of interests, the Corporate Director advised that as no other credible offers had been made to the company, the Council had, therefore, made a decision to explore the opportunity.
- For clarification, the Corporate Director advised that the agent had been informed that the Council would not be intending to provide compensation for the remaining leases at the site – the site would be purchased as a vacant possession.

A Member pointed out that this information should be included within the business case.

- A Member said that he had been contacted by several concerned residents regarding the proposals for the site and asked if consultation would be taking place with the residents on the Festival Park site. He also pointed out that the Fishing Club was currently emptying the litter bins located within the park site.

The Corporate Director advised that the management and maintenance arrangements would be one of the areas that would form part of the detailed work being undertaken as

part of the site acquisition due diligence. Adoption of the highways would also form part of this consideration.

With regard to consultation and engagement, this would not be undertaken at this juncture until a decision had been taken in respect of the final business case.

- Another Member said that time was of the essence and the project needed to be progressed and the complexities unravelled. He concluded by referring to the economic benefits of bringing the site back into public ownership.

The Executive Member for Regeneration & Economic Development said that a tremendous amount of work had been undertaken in a short space of time and the final business case would be considered at the Special Council on 22nd October.

In reply to a point raised, the Corporate Director said that the topic being dealt with contained commercially confidential information and was deemed to be an exempt item and if shared could damage the Council's relationship with external parties. He urged Members not to disclose or share any of this information with parties outside of this meeting.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report which related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) be accepted and the information contained therein be noted.

No. 31

SHORTLISTING - JNC OFFICERS

Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.

RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 12 & 13, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).

Consideration was given to the report of the meeting held on 28th July, 2020.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report which related to staffing matters be accepted and the decision contained therein be noted.