

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 11TH DECEMBER, 2020**

**REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER**

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. HEALY (CHAIR)**

Councillors M. Cook (Vice-Chair)  
P. Baldwin  
L. Elias  
J. Hill  
H. McCarthy  
J. P. Morgan  
G. Paulsen  
T. Smith  
S. Thomas

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Social Services  
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services  
Corporate Director of Education  
Chief Officer – Commercial  
Chief Officer - Resources  
Head of Organisational Development  
Head of Governance & Partnerships  
Press & Publicity Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>No. 1</b>	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>  It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	

<p><b>No. 2</b></p>	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>The following apologies for absence were received from:-</p> <p>Councillor G. Collier  Councillor M. Cross  Councillor C. Meredith  Councillor L. Parsons  Head of Community Services</p>	
<p><b>No. 3</b></p>	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
<p><b>No. 4</b></p>	<p><b><u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p><b>No. 5</b></p>	<p><b><u>TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW REPORT - 1ST APRIL 2020 TO 30TH SEPTEMBER 2020</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to give Members the opportunity to scrutinise the Treasury Management activities carried out by the Authority during the first half of the 2020/21 financial year.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report which provided Members with the opportunity to scrutinise the Treasury Management activities carried out by the Authority under delegated powers of the Chief Officer Resources during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2020 in accordance with the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice. The Chief Officer noted that despite the financial climate in relation to the pandemic, the Authority had performed well in terms of its Treasury Management activities during the first half of the year and outlined the work undertaken as detailed in the report.</p>	

The Chief Officer Resources advised that the interest payments made had been minimised as far as possible with the average rate of interest of 0.67% being below the benchmarked rate which showed good performance. The Council had also not been exposed to any financial losses as a result of the current difficult economic climate.

At this juncture, the Chair invited questions/observations from Members.

A Member asked if the Authority still invested in fossil fuel and the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that there were no direct investments with fossil fuel companies. The Chief Officer noted previous discussions and informed that the pension fund had changed the strategy to move away from investments in fossil fuels and the Council's own Investment Strategy was being reviewed.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2, Members scrutinised the treasury management activity undertaken during the 2020/2021 financial year and no comment was provided prior to its submission to full Council.

**No. 6** **HEALTH AND SAFETY ANNUAL REPORT 01/04/2019 - 31/03/2020**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development which was presented to give Members the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge information and recommendations to mitigate concerns and risks on the Authority's Health and Safety and Fire Safety at work performance for 2019/20.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that the report would normally be presented during the July to September period, however due to the emergency response to the pandemic it had been delayed. The report provided the Committee with an opportunity to scrutinise and challenge recommendations made to

mitigate concerns and risks on the Authority's Health and Safety and Fire Safety at work performance for 2019/20. The Officer added that overall performance was good and these findings were detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

The Appendix outlined good performance along with areas of concerns and actions to be undertaken to address these matters. It was added that the report did not include any of the Health and Safety response to the emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This information would form part of the report reviewing for 2020/2021.

The Head of Organisational Development referred to the appendix and a correction of the figures for Social Service – there had been 50 accidents which was still a decrease on the year before.

The Committee noted the information accordingly.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, Members of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee supported the detailed report and the actions recommended to mitigate areas of concern.

**No. 7**

**PREPARATIONS FOR EU TRANSITION**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Governance & Partnerships and the Policy Officer which was presented to provide Members with an update on the preparatory work undertaken during the EU Transition Period.

The Head of Governance and Partnerships spoke to the report which provided an update on the preparatory work undertaken during the EU Transition Period. The Officer noted that the UK had left on the 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2020 and entered a transition period until 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2020. The Head of Governance and Partnerships advised that there still remained a level of uncertainty on the full implications of exiting the EU would have on local authorities. The Officer Core Planning Group had continued to meet during the pandemic to facilitate EU transition preparations and regular

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information had been received from the Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Government in relation to the overall national picture. The Officer added that information from the Home Office regarding the EU Settlement Scheme was also being received and the Local Authority was represented on the WLGA Brexit Coordinator network.

The Head of Governance and Partnerships continued that the core officer planning group developed an impact and risk assessment to identify and respond to the local risks and opportunities associated with leaving the EU. An action plan had been established for Blaenau Gwent which was linked to the Action Plan developed by Welsh Government.

The Officer further spoke to the report and gave a detailed overview of the key activities, expected public outcomes and forward planning as detailed in the report.

At this juncture the Chair invited questions from Members.

In response to a question raised about the financial implications, the Head of Governance and Partnerships advised that the worst case scenario was being planned for as the Authority was not sure on the deal to be received. The Officer added that the scenarios were based on known evidence and intelligence gathered. It was anticipated that the outcome of the deal would be felt in phases.

The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services added that the Authority was uncertain of the impact on local businesses or the financial impact, however, any implications would be in the medium term and it would be monitored. The Corporate Director noted that a key issue for the Authority was the shared prosperity fund. This would be divided via the UK Government, therefore it was important to ensure there was local democracy.

Another Member noted the importance of the overlap of projects funded via Europe which would need to be continued.

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The Head of Governance and Partnerships added that all this information would be provided as it developed via reports to this Committee.

A Member asked if there were groups working within communities.

The Head of Governance and Partnerships confirmed that there were groups which worked within our communities. The Core Officer Planning Group supported individuals to engage in the settlement scheme via community groups, education settlements and also digital support via libraries.

The Policy Officer added that as at 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2020 980 EU Nationals had applied to the Settlement Scheme. The deadline was 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2021 and work would continue to ensure people were registered.

Another Member anticipated that the next report could provide opportunities for Blaenau Gwent and the Officer advised that part of the Core Officer Working Group was to look for opportunities and to understand where they are and any associated risks.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2, progress made during the transition period be noted and specific comments or recommendations prior to the report being presented to the Executive for approval and update reports be received as part of its forward work programme.

**No. 8**

**CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY**  
**PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial which was presented for Members to consider the performance of the Communication Strategy with focus on the impact of the strategy during COVID-19 Pandemic from March to September 2020.

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The Chief Officer Commercial spoke to the report which outlined the performance and impact of the Communication Strategy during COVID19 Pandemic and outlined the key points as contained in the report.

A Member noted the excellent work undertaken by the Communications Team, however he had hoped that there would be a more proactive approach from the Leader of the Council.

The Member advised that Leaders of neighbouring authorities had been featured in news reports during the pandemic, although the Leader of the Blaenau Gwent Council had not been seen during these unprecedented times. The Member added that as Leader it was important that key messages were given by the Leader to ensure our communities had confidence in the Council and was able to put a name to the face.

The Chair felt that there had been no reason for the Leader of the Council to take part in Welsh news reports. The Member referred to the high cases of Covid-19 in Blaenau Gwent and asked was this not a reason for the Leader of the Council to address our residents, as other Leaders had done in Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Torfaen and Rhondda Cynon Taff.

Another Member concurred with the comments raised and stated it was not just about television appearances but also about radio and newspaper articles. The Member was of the opinion that public confidence during these uncertain times was critical and although the work of the Communications Team was outstanding there was a need for political input. The public preferred to see comments from a political point of view not a Council's spokesperson.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, the performance of the Communication Strategy be noted, particularly on the impact of the strategy during COVID19 Pandemic. The period covered will be from March to September 2020.

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**No. 9**

**COMMERCIAL STRATEGY PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial which was presented for Members to consider the performance of the Commercial Strategy and focus on the impact of the strategy on the period from March to September 2020.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, the performance of the Commercial Strategy during the period March 2020 – September 2020 be noted.

**No. 10**

**SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development which was presented to provide Members with the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the sickness absence performance for 2019/20.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that the report provided Members with an opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the sickness absence performance for 2019/20. It also outlined the continued actions to support improvement in attendance and recognised the positive attendance of the majority of the workforce.

The Head of Organisational Development added that the overall year end outturn figure for the Council of 13.91 days per full time equivalent employee which was 13.48 days excluding Covid-19 sickness. This was an increase from the previous year's outturn of 12.66 days and exceeded the target set of 11 days. This information was further detailed in the appendices attached to the report. The Officer further referred to historical measures put in place to improve attendance and ongoing measures in an attempt to address attendance.

A Member raised concerns around the continued increase in sickness within the Authority and referred to the work of the Task and Finish Group which had seen little improvement in the figures. However, although there was a pandemic which would affect



sickness levels it was felt that sickness levels remained very high across the Council.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that the Policy had been fundamentally reviewed and it was concluded that it was fit for purpose by the Task and Finish Group. The iTrent HR system provides detailed information to managers to enable the management of sickness absence.

In response to further concerns around sickness levels and performance it was advised that the information was presented to CLT on a quarterly basis and formed part of the Performance and Finance report which was presented to Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis.

A further question was raised in relation to individual departments sickness levels being monitored, the Head of Organisational Development advised that each Directorate would be reviewing the top 20 cases. Last year reports were considered at the respective Scrutiny Committees with an overarching report presented to the Executive.

A Member asked if Blaenau Gwent could work in collaboration with a neighbouring Authority to ascertain how they addressed sickness levels. It was confirmed that this exercise was undertaken as part of the Task and Finish Group work.

In response to a request to bring further reports through the political process, it was stated that the Authority was responding to Covid-19 at present and capacity would be an issue.

The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, the Scrutiny Committee having scrutinised the sickness absence performance information and the ongoing actions to support improved attendance within the Council identify any further areas for improvement in order to drive forward performance improvement.

No. 11

**MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2021/2022 TO 2025/2026**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to Members to gain approval of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and provides Members with the latest assessment of the Council's financial position over the next 5 years.

The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report and provided a detailed overview of the key points as outlined in the report and appendices.

The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, as follows:-

- considered and agreed the MTFS;
- noted the forecast funding gap for the period of the MTFS;
- the cost pressures identified at Appendix 1 of the MTFS be noted; and
- the progress update within the Strategic Business Reviews attached at Appendix 2 of the MTFS be noted.

No. 12

**FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME: 22ND JANUARY 2021**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee.

A Member requested a report on consultancy fees be presented to a future Committee. It was advised that this had been requested and agreed at the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. However, the Member felt that as this was a corporate issue the overarching report should be presented to the Corporate Services Committee. The Member was aware that a report had also been requested by the Social Services Scrutiny Committee, therefore it was suggested that information be presented to respective Scrutiny Committees with an overarching report to the Corporate Services Committee.

The Chief Officer Resources agreed to this course of action.

Another Member referred to CCTV progress reports and noted that it had not been included on the FWP. The Chief Officer Resources advised that these reports were planned on the Forward Work Programme, however it would be presented later in the year and not the January meeting.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2, the Forward Work Programme be agreed for the meeting 22nd January 2021, as presented.