

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

SUBJECT: CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 16TH JULY, 2021

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. HEALY (CHAIR)

Councillors M. Cook (Vice-Chair)
P. Baldwin
G. Collier
M. Cross
G. A. Davies
L. Elias
J. Hill
J. Holt
C. Meredith
J. P. Morgan
G. Paulsen
T. Smith
S. Thomas

WITH: Managing Director
Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Corporate Director of Education
Chief Officer - Resources
Head of Organisational Development
Service Manager, Customer Experience & Transformation
Service Manager Performance & Democratic
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u>	

	It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>There were no apologies for absence reported for Members.</p> <p>An apology for absence was received from the Chief Officer Commercial and Customer.</p>	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>TIME OF FUTURE MEETINGS</u></p> <p>The Committee AGREED that future meetings be held at 10.00 a.m.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 16th April, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>A Member advised that, as noted in the minutes, he had still not received a response from the Director of Regeneration & Community Services and this was the third month awaiting a response to his request for information. The Chair suggested that the Member speak directly with the Director of Regeneration & Community Services following this meeting.</p> <p><u>CCTV</u></p> <p>A Member requested clarity on when the progress report on CCTV would be presented to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee. The Chair confirmed that a progress report on CCTV was included on the Forward Work Programme for the next meeting of this Committee on 10th September, 2021.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	

No. 6

PROPOSED SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22

Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee which presented the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Work Programme for 2021-22 (Appendix 1) and to seek approval from Committee.

A Member referred to climate change and although it was not a subject for this Committee, he felt that every agenda should include information regarding climate change. The Service Manager Performance & Democratic advised Members that from September 2021 the standard report template would contain a section on decarbonisation that will then be reported into all Committees.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 2021-22 be agreed.

No. 7

WORKFORCE STRATEGY 2021-2026

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development which was presented to give Members of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the draft Workforce Strategy 2021-2026 (Appendix 1).

The Head of Organisational Development spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein which included that the draft Workforce Strategy was a five year strategy focusing on the future, linking service outcomes with the workforce required to deliver those outcomes and planning for the workforce for the future.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the proposed draft Workforce Strategy 2021-2026 be supported to progress for endorsement at Council.

No. 8

END OF YEAR 2020/21 FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE REPORT

Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager Performance and Democratic which was to present to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee the end of year position of the Finance and Performance Report for the year 2020/21 (attached at Appendix 1).

The Service Manager Performance & Democratic spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member commented that undoubtedly good work had been undertaken throughout the year, particularly during the pandemic and clearly some of the financial aspects of the report were made in good budgetary conditions. He felt that Bridging the Gap needed to be tested properly and was mindful that Welsh Government hardship funding had enabled the Council to deliver the budget.

A Member referred to absenteeism and enquired if there had been any improvement during the past year of the pandemic. The Head of Organisational Development said absenteeism had reduced as a result of homeworking. A review was being undertaken on the figures and performance over the last year and a report would be presented to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee in September.

A Member raised concerns regarding absenteeism in the Planning and Building Control sections in relation to site visits. Another Member also raised the issue of absenteeism across the Council, even though absenteeism was reducing he felt this still needed to be addressed as the Council were buying services in from Agencies in Torfaen and Cardiff regarding Planning and Building Control issues. The Head of Organisational Development said the figures contained in the report were the end of year position from April 2020 to March 2021 and reiterated that a report reviewing sickness absence performance would be presented to this Committee in September. She acknowledged that there were absences in Building Control and service continuity plans were being developed by the Directorate.

The Managing Director said there was a specific issue in that service that the Director of Regeneration & Community Services

and his team were looking into, overall sickness absence figures across the Council were falling.

The Director of Regeneration & Community Services said that within the department there were a particular set of circumstances in Building Control and in Planning. In relation to Building Control, the Service Manager Development and Estates had advised Members via a note of the unique set of circumstances where all four Building Control Officers were absent for different reasons and in order to maintain a service to the community, arrangements had been put in place with some neighbouring Councils in relation to plan checking, which was a reciprocal arrangement and did not affect the service to residents. He confirmed that agency support had been secured in relation to Building Control, there were two at present and this would allow on-site inspections to be undertaken and provide a service as good as could be expected within the current circumstances. In relation to Planning, determining planning applications was a key priority and some consultancy support had been brought in to help process the planning applications, he advised that this had been undertaken in the past during particular peaks of planning applications. The Director assured Members that the situation was being addressed and explained that absences were not across the entire department, there had been two different sets of circumstances that had happened at the same time.

With regard to Planning a Member commented that residents had raised concerns that they were paying planning fees, only for decisions to be made at meetings without a site visit taking place and enquired if this was the usual practice. The Director of Regeneration & Community Services said the Member maybe referring to a pre-application consultation whereby applicants could discuss their planning applications with Planning Officers in advance of submission to get a steer on whether the application would meet planning criteria.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the information as presented be accepted.

No. 9

MINIMUM REVENUE PROVISION (MRP) POLICY REVISION

Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to consider a proposed change to

the Authority's Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy and the impact this will have on the minimum revenue provision going forward.

The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

Councillor P. Baldwin left the meeting at this juncture.

A Member enquired regarding the cost of engaging Treasury Advisors, Link Asset Services, to conduct a review of the current MRP policy. The Chief Officer Resources did not have the exact figure to hand but estimated that it was in the region of £2,000 to £3,000 and would be funded via the Resources service budget.

The Member raised concerns that this was pushing debt into the future for later administrations. He felt that given the good settlements that this Authority had received from the Welsh Government that the Council should be doing more to mitigate cost pressures themselves. He had concerns regarding future Authority administrations being able to use prudential borrowing in more austere budgetary conditions. The Member quoted from a previous MRP report where Members had been informed that "during the MRP reduction period up to 2022/23 the Authority would have a longer period of time to plan and implement longer term transformational savings that would contribute towards mitigating the MRP increase at the end of year five". He felt that this report now showed that that was a complete failure.

The Chief Officer Resources did not agree with the Members comments and said they had identified and achieved a significant level of efficiencies and savings during the five year period and had been faced with additional unexpected cost pressures in addition to the MRP.

The Member was aware that the Chief Officer Resources was not in post at the time of the previous MRP report, but commented that Members had taken the decision to support, in the knowledge that this Council would find a way of mitigating those cost pressures coming in 2022/23, and felt that the administration had failed to do that and had to enter into another MRP agreement going forward which would put debt on to future generations to come. The Member could not support the report and would propose an alternative recommendation following further debate.

Another Member also felt this was storing up debt for future generations. He quoted point 5.1.5. from the report - For the purpose of this report the Authority's future capital expenditure estimates have not been included in the analysis and all options are based on the CFR position as at 31 March 2021 – and enquired if the £70 million that the Authority was borrowing and the payback of £1.4 million was not included in these calculations. The Chief Officer Resources explained that this change in policy would not impact on the actual debt repayment made every year. The £70m proposed loan from the Welsh Government was not included in the calculations for two reasons, the first was that the Council had yet to agree to accept the loan on a long term basis and the second reason was that if Council did agree to accept the loan, an income stream had been identified that would offset the MRP charge for that loan, therefore, it would have a neutral impact on the net MRP calculation going forward.

A Member commented that having listened to the Chief Officer Resources presentation of the report and opposing arguments and considering the positive impact of the report the Member proposed Option 2, this proposal was seconded.

In response, the Member reiterated that the figures would increase moving forward and the burden was going to be felt by future generations. The Member again referred to the previous report that the Council would do all it could to mitigate cost pressures and consider additional resources for the future. The proposal looked positive for the first five year period but up to 2033 the figures would increase and future Council administrations would be saddled by debt and felt that the Council could mitigate cost pressures using the favourable settlements received from the Welsh Government.

A Member proposed the following alternative recommendation:-

- That the Council take the opportunity to deal with the situation now, using monies, following a better settlement from the Welsh Government, and not to store debt for the future.

This alternative recommendation was seconded.

A recorded vote was, therefore, requested.

In Favour of the alternative recommendation – Councillors S. Thomas, M. Cross, L. Elias and T. Smith.

Against the alternative recommendation – Councillors S. Healy, M. Cook, G.A. Davies, J. Hill, J. Holt, C. Meredith, J.P. Morgan and G. Paulsen.

Councillor G. Collier abstained from voting.

The vote on the alternative recommendation was not carried.

The Chair, therefore, proposed Option 2 (preferred option). This Option was seconded and therefore,

the Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that Members scrutinised the proposals and recommend to Executive / Council to support the change of the supported borrowing element of the MRP from 2% straight line to a 50-year annuity basis and to changing the unsupported borrowing element of the MRP from an individual asset annuity basis to a weighted average annuity basis. This change is to be applied from 1st April 2021.