

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO:	<u>THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL</u>
SUBJECT:	<u>ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL – 25TH MARCH, 2021</u>
REPORT OF:	<u>DEMOCRATIC OFFICER</u>

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR M. MOORE (CHAIR,
PRESIDING)

Councillors P. Baldwin
D. Bevan
J. Collins
M. Cook
M. Cross
N. Daniels
D. Davies
G. A. Davies
G. L. Davies
M. Day
P. Edwards
L. Elias
D. Hancock
K. Hayden
S. Healy
J. Hill
W. Hodgins
M. Holland
J. Holt
J. Mason
H. McCarthy, B.A. (Hons)
C. Meredith
J. Millard
J. C. Morgan
J. P. Morgan
L. Parsons
G. Paulsen
K. Pritchard
K. Rowson

T. Sharrem
T. Smith
B. Summers
B. Thomas
G. Thomas
S. Thomas
H. Trollope
J. Wilkins
D. Wilkshire
B. Willis
L. Winnett

AND: Managing Director
Corporate Director of Education
Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Chief Officer Resources
Interim Chief Officer Commercial
Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance
Head of Organisational Development
Service Manager – Accountancy
Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager
Democratic Officer
Democratic Support Officer

<u>No.</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
1.	<p><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
2.	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>An apology for absence was received from Councillor G. Collier.</p>	

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS

The following declarations of interest were reported:

Item No. 31 – ICT Investment Strategy

Councillor Wayne Hodgins

Item No. 35: Pay Policy Statement 2021/2022

- Michelle Morris – Managing Director
- Richard Crook – Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
- Damien McCann – Corporate Director of Social Services
- Lynn Phillips – Corporate Director of Education
- Rhian Hayden – Chief Officer Resources
- Bernadette Elias – Interim Chief Officer Commercial
- Andrea Jones – Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
- Andrea Prosser – Head of Organisational Development
- Gina Taylor – Service Manager Accountancy
- Sean Scannell - Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager
- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer
- Michelle Hicks – Democratic Support Officer

The above-named officers would leave the meeting whilst this item of business was considered. However, the following officers would remain in the meeting to note proceedings:

- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer (minute clerk)
- Michelle Hicks – Democratic Support Officer

Item No. 40 – NMC Site, Brynmawr

Councillor John C. Morgan

4. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Congratulations were expressed to:

Tyler Allen, a 10-year old boy from Six Bells who had completed a challenge to read 2 million words as part of the Accelerated Reader

programme. Tyler had started the challenge in September and had read his first 1 million words by Christmas and he's since read the second 1 million words at home.

Tyler was due to have a special recognition assembly held at Six Bells Primary but with schools being closed this had not been possible.

The Executive Member for Education and Chair of Council had, therefore, sent letters to Tyler to congratulate him on this fantastic achievement.

COVID-19 – Remembrance Day – 23rd March, 2021

To mark the one-year anniversary since the start of the pandemic Members and officers took a minute of silent reflection to remember those who had sadly passed away from COVID-19.

5 – MINUTE BOOK – NOVEMBER 2020 – MARCH 2021 **25.**

The Minute Book for the period November 2020 – March 2021 was submitted for consideration.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the minutes be approved and confirmed as a true record of proceedings.

At this juncture, the Leader of the Labour Group requested that a short brief statement be provided to update Members on the return to school of children and the numbers of COVID-19 cases that had subsequently been reported.

The Corporate Director of Education reported that the position as of 24th March, 2021, was that 130 pupils were currently self-isolating because it had been recognised that these pupils were part of contact groups where positive cases had been confirmed and 6 positive cases (of teaching staff and pupils) had been confirmed. However, this position was changing daily as information had been

received that day of a further reported positive case that had been identified in a primary school in the Tredegar area.

A Member referred to a previous discussion that had taken place regarding local Members being informed of any cases within schools and expressed her concern that on this occasion that this information had not been received.

The Corporate Director of Education referred to the agreement which reflected back to the autumn term, which was that if there were any particular school closures, Members would be advised and periodically Members would also be updated on the overall position. However, at this juncture school closures were not required.

26. MEMBERS QUESTIONS

There were no questions submitted by Members.

27. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no questions submitted by members of the public.

28. TREASURY MANAGEMENT – TREASURY STRATEGY STATEMENT, INVESTMENT STRATEGY & MRP POLICY STATEMENT 2021/2022 (INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS)

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

At the invitation of the Chair, the Chief Officer Resources explained that the purpose of the report was to consider the Treasury Strategy Statement, Investment Strategy and MRP Policy Statement for adoption for the 2021/2022 financial year. It was pointed out that the report had been prepared in accordance with the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management, which required an annual

Treasury Strategy Statement (TSS) to be approved in advance of the relevant financial year.

The Annual Investment Strategy which formed part of the Treasury Strategy Statement (TSS) and the Prudential Indicators for 2021/2022 would be kept under review throughout the year and any required changes would be reported to Council at that point in time. The Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy Statement 2021/2022 was also included as part of the TSS. It was noted that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee had scrutinised the TSS prior to recommendation for formal approval by Council and in response to comments made by the Scrutiny Committee previously, the strategy now included a section relating to Ethical Investments – this could be found at Section 4.7 of Appendix 1.

The Code also recommended that Council created and maintained a Treasury Management Policy Statement (TMPS), stating the policies and objectives of its treasury management activities. Although the Code did not require authorities to seek approval of the TMPS, it had been attached to the report as Appendix B for information.

The Chief Officer advised that the strategy been updated to take account of recent forecasts (the primary objectives of the strategy statement which would be adhered to were the security and liquidity of investments) and reported that there were no significant changes compared to 2020/2021 financial year.

The Chief Officer concluded by making reference to Item No. 41 on the agenda – Ebbw Valley Railway and advised that should this report be agreed, the operational boundaries and authorised limits contained within the strategy would be required to be revised.

It was, thereupon, unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Annual Treasury Strategy Statement & Annual Investment Strategy & MRP Policy Statement for 2021/2022 financial year and the Treasury Management Prudential Indicators contained therein be agreed.

29. CAPITAL STRATEGY 2021/2022

Members considered the report of the Chief Officer Resources.

The purpose of this report was to provide Members with the opportunity to consider and adopt the Capital Strategy for the financial year 2021/2022, following its annual review.

It was noted that the Capital Strategy provided a high level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contributed to the provision of services and how associated risk was managed and the implications for future financial sustainability. The strategy outlined the principles and framework at a very high level that shaped the capital investment proposals.

The Chief Officer Resources continued by advising that the principal aim of the strategy was the delivery of an affordable programme of capital consistent with the Medium Term Financial Strategy, that contributed to the authority's achievement of priorities and objectives as outlined in the Corporate Plan (i.e. it would inform the way in which long term service objectives were delivered). In addition, it considered associated risks particularly, those associated with commercial opportunities and recognised financial constraints over the longer term.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Capital Strategy 2021/2022 be agreed.

30. CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2020/21 to 2025/26

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

The Chief Officer Resources advised that the report provided an update on the full Capital Programme (to 2025/26) and the impact upon the capital contingency as a result of recent capital investment

approvals. It was noted that as at October 2019 a capital contingency of £2.843m remained for allocation at a future date.

The additional schemes approved recently (detailed in paragraph 2.2 of the report) totalled £2,026,000 with further funding of £650,000. This resulted in a net increase in the capital programme and a subsequent reduction in the capital contingency of £1,376,000. The opportunity had also been taken to revisit the level of available funding and table 2.3.2 identified an additional £630,000 that could be included for capital investment – this was as a result of the budgeted funding being reviewed upon receipt of the recent settlement received from Welsh Government.

Section 2.4 of the report identified a re-profiling of the Council's contribution to the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal bringing forward a number of schemes, the original profile identified a funding requirement from the Council of £4,940,000 for the period 2017/18 to 2025/26, however the new profile required funding of £5,543,000 during the same period, with the remaining £603,000 required in 2026/27. However, the latest profile provided by the City Deal indicated that the full contribution of £5.54m would be required by 2022/23 and this resulted in an additional £603,000 required within the current capital programme. It was noted that City Deal was bringing forward the profile due to a number of approved projects and pipeline projects which were expected to commence and incur expenditure during 2022/23.

The impact of the changes to the capital programme and capital contingency were detailed in paragraph 5.1.2 of the report - the contingency now remaining was just under £1.5m. It was recommended that the Council maintain a capital contingency with a target of £1m which, equated to 5% of Blaenau Gwent's own resources in the capital programme, in the event that should all capital funding be allocated there would be limited funding available for allocation for future projects and to address any potential overspending capital schemes. Details of the future projects and potential overspends were included at paragraphs 5.2.2. and 6.1.1 respectively.

In reply to a question, the Chief Officer Resources confirmed that any use or bid to use the capital contingency would require approval of Council.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that:

- The re-profiling of the City Deal funding be agreed and the updated Capital Programme and the impact the recent approvals, revised funding and re-profiling of the City Deal funding had on the capital contingency be noted.
- Maintaining a capital contingency with a target of £1m equating to 5% of Blaenau Gwent's own resources within the capital programme (2020/21 to 2025/26) be agreed.

31. ICT INVESTMENT ROADMAP

Councillor Wayne Hodgins declared an interest in this item but remained in the meeting whilst it was considered but took no part in the discussion.

Consideration was given to the joint officers' report.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial outlined the purpose of the report which was to provide the Council with a full set of proposals on investment options required to maintain a stable and resilient ICT infrastructure.

The proposals were broken down into three categories which aimed to describe the current challenges and future options, namely:

- Desktop estate – a 5-year refresh of laptops and desktop estate was proposed.
- Network and telephony estate – it was proposed to replace outdated telephony estate and improve service delivery which included the switchboard functionality.
- Contract register – there may be an opportunity to reduce expenditure on key software and hardware contracts that were managed on the Council's behalf by the SRS and some that were managed directly by the Council. This would include a review of the number of PSBA connections which, if reduced could lead to financial savings.

The recent experience of the pandemic and the move to agile working had shown how technology could support the Council in delivering its democratic arrangements and service delivery.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial concluded by advising that both the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee on 22nd January and the Executive Committee on 24th February, 2021 had endorsed Option 1.

The Chief Officer Resources commenced by advising that Section 5 of the report identified both the capital and revenue investment required to fund the proposals with an initial £464,000 investment in the first two years followed by an annual investment thereafter of £166,000. However, since the original report had been considered by the Scrutiny Committee and the Executive, the Council had received a Digital Transformation Grant from Welsh Government and as a result the capital funding proposal for this investment had been amended to propose the first three years of the investment be funded from the ICT Reserve (£63,000) and the Digital Transformation Grant (£567,000).

In terms of the revenue costs for the implementation of Teams Telephony and the Contact Centre, these were estimated to be £77,000 per annum. This would be funded from the established revenue budget with these costs replacing costs being incurred on the current arrangements which would no longer be required. The Chief Officer concluded by stating that there were however, expected to be some transitional costs incurred whilst transferring from the current provision to the new arrangements and it was proposed that these cost be funded by the ICT Reserve.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the ICT infrastructure investment be approved.

32. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

Members considered the report of the Interim Chief Officer Commercial.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely it was noted that there was a sufficient level of support for Elected Members.

33. ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2019/2020

Consideration was given to the joint officers' report.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the 'scrutiny activity' that had been undertaken by each Scrutiny Committee during 2019/20 be approved and the report be published on the Blaenau Gwent website.

34. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL FOR WALES (IRPW) 2021/2022

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the determinations as set out in the annual IRPW report be noted.

35. PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2021/2022

The following officers declared an interest in this item and left the meeting whilst the item was considered:

- Michelle Morris – Managing Director
- Richard Crook – Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
- Damien McCann – Corporate Director of Social Services
- Lynn Phillips – Corporate Director of Education
- Rhian Hayden – Chief Officer Resources
- Bernadette Elias – Interim Chief Officer Commercial
- Andrea Jones – Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
- Andrea Prosser – Head of Organisational Development
- Gina Taylor – Service Manager - Accountancy
- Sean Scannell - Communications, Marketing and Customer Access Manager

The following officers remained in the meeting whilst this item was considered to note proceedings:

- Ceri Edwards-Brown – Democratic Officer
- Michelle Hicks – Democratic Support Officer

The report of the Head of Organisational Development was submitted for consideration.

It was noted that the Localism Act 2011, Chapter 8 (Sections 38 to 43), required Local Authorities to prepare an annual Pay Policy Statement which must articulate the Authority's policies in respect of a range of issues relating to the pay of its workforce, particularly policies relating to the remuneration of its senior staff (Chief Officers) and its lowest paid employees.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Pay Policy Statement 2021/2022 be approved.

The officers named above who left the meeting whilst the item was considered returned to the meeting at this juncture.

36. NEW COUNCIL OPERATING MODEL AND WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Consideration was given to the report of the Managing Director.

The Managing Director spoke in detail to the report which sought approval for a new Operating Model and Working Arrangements for the Council. This was a significant decision for Blaenau Gwent - the choice was whether to revert to how the Council operated previously as the country emerged from lockdown and was recovering from the pandemic or to take an ambitious step forward and learn from experience and response over the last 12 months and demonstrate community leadership by creating an agile and modern organisation.

It was noted that the new working arrangements would involve a move to an agile working model for the workforce on a permanent basis based upon the learning and experiences of how the Council had operated over last 12 months. This would require a decision to permanently vacate the Civic Centre and release the land for regeneration purposes, create a new Democratic Hub at the General Offices for formal council business and create a network of Community Hubs co-located with libraries.

These proposals had been developed over a number of months and the Managing Director outlined the sequence of reports that had been presented to Council since July 2020 (paragraphs 2.5 – 2.7 of the report) which had concluded in November 2020 with a report which recommended that the position previously agreed at Council, to proceed with acquisition of Festival Park, be left to private investors who had expressed an interest in the site to take it forward but that the Council should take forward the other aspects agreed at Council (October 2020) to develop the democratic facility at the General Offices, Community Hubs in town centres, and vacate and demolish the Civic Centre. It was pointed out that capital allocations to undertake this work had previously been agreed by Council.

Since the decision of Council in November, the Member Working Group had worked with officers and Trade Union representatives to develop a model for the new working arrangements, based on agile

working, which would allow the organisation to operate out of its remaining offices at Anvil Court, ViTCC, General Offices and other appropriate Council buildings. These proposals were detailed in Section 5 of this report.

There were a number of benefits associated with the operation of an agile working model and these included:

- The creation of flexible and agile working arrangements for staff and it was proposed because there would be contractual changes that an allowance would be provided for home and agile workers.
- Based on evidence there would be an improved work/life balance reducing the daily commute and continuation of the high level of productivity.
- Reduction in days lost to sickness absence.

The Managing Director recognised that the arrangement would not suit all staff and the model would allow for adjustments to be made for those members of staff who may be categorised as either home or agile workers but who would be unable to do this on a permanent basis due to personal circumstances.

As part of the proposal, there would be a need to continue to invest in ICT infrastructure and this would include investment and upgrading of the telephony system to enable work to be carried out in agile and mobile way and to improve contact arrangements for officers and service users.

In terms of benefits for the Council:

- Improved civic front door for the Council and council business.
- More attractive as an employer – employment opportunities for those people who welcomed the opportunity to work flexibly.
- Reduce costs for buildings and maintenance. Maximisation and more efficient use of the remaining buildings.
- Decarbonisation – the proposal would have a significant positive impact on the ambition to become a net carbon Council by 2030.

- The proposal supported various aspects of the Bridging the Gap Programme, Medium Term Financial Strategy, Corporate Plan and Decarbonisation and Commercial Strategies.
- The creation of strong leadership within the community which would demonstrate building back a new and better normal as recovery from the pandemic continued.

The benefits to the residents and communities were:

- Community Hubs would form a key part of the new arrangements which, would enable residents to have local access to the Council and improved access to the organisation and its services. This would allow resources to be invested into front line services.
- The proposal would unlock the next phase of regeneration in Ebbw Vale with the clearance of the Civic Centre site.

In terms of formal Council business when this was able to resume in person, would take place at the Democratic Hub and facilities would be provided for Members as they were previously provided at the Civic Centre. Meetings would continue using the Microsoft Teams platform to enable a blended approach to meetings for Members and officers to either physically or remotely attend. It was noted that remote access to meetings and the broadcasting of meetings live, was now a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill.

The financial case for the proposals were included within the report at paragraph 5.1. It was noted that a capital investment would be required and the total capital costs of the development of the Democratic and Community Hubs, decommissioning / demolition of the Civic Centre and refurbishment of Anvil Court / VITCC were estimated to cost £1.2m.

The Council had already agreed capital funding of £180,000 to support the delivery of the Democratic Hub and Community Hubs and had agreed that the costs for the demolition of the Civic Centre would be offset by capital receipts generated from the sale of the site which, was estimated to achieve in excess of £650,000. It was proposed that the remaining capital requirement be funded by a contribution from revenue, utilising the Transformation budget for

2021/2022. In addition, revenue savings of £1.4m were projected over a 5-year period would help significantly with commitment to reduce carbon output as an organisation.

The Managing Director concluded by advising that Option 1 was the preferred option i.e. that Council approved the new Operating Model based on Agile Working, Democratic Hub and Community Hubs, and confirmed work could now proceed to decommission the Civic Centre.

The views of Members were, thereupon, sought (summarised below) and were responded to by the Managing Director/Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services/Chief Officer Resources/Interim Chief Officer Commercial:

- Reference was made to the requirement to adhere to the GDPR regulations and the need for confidentiality to be maintained whilst staff were working from home and concern was expressed that this did not form part of the 'risks' identified within the report and this would be particularly relevant when there would be a return to 'normal' and people were allowed to visit each at home. In addition, since it was now one year since agile working had been introduced due to the pandemic and the need to work from home, a Member enquired whether a further staff survey would be undertaken to ascertain their views.

The Managing Director confirmed that confidentiality had not been raised as a specific risk because it was a risk in whichever manner that staff worked i.e. it was not a heightened risk because of this proposal and already formed part of the Corporate Risk Register as part of the previous working arrangements. However, it was an important point and confidentiality was about all parties maintaining confidentiality in respect of issues that were not within the public domain and all officers and Members had a duty to maintain this. With regard to GDPR, these were specific regulations that related to personal data and the need for compliance wherever or however officers worked. The Managing Director reiterated that whilst these were important issues they were risks that were already carried by the organisation and had not specifically been identified within the report because the risk would not significantly increase.

However, the importance of these issues would continue to be emphasised to staff irrespective of which operating model was adopted.

The Managing Director continued by stating that the results of the staff survey which had been conducted last autumn had been shared as part of the report, and subject to the decision taken at Council, staff engagement and consultation would be extremely important and further engagement and consultation would be undertaken in conjunction with the Trade Unions going forward.

The Member pointed out that offices were controlled environments and expressed his concern that there was a greater chance and heightened risk of mistakes occurring when staff had to work from home or from other venues such as libraries/community hubs.

The Managing Director advised that unfortunately on occasions, data and security breaches had occurred when staff had been working in a controlled environment. In terms of the Community Hubs, arrangements would be made for discussions of a personal or confidential nature to take place in a private environment and not within the wider library open setting.

- The Leader of the Labour Group agreed with his colleague that if work was undertaken in a variety of settings then the risk in relation to confidentiality and GDPR was surely enhanced. He continued by placing on record his disappointment that this major, significant report had not been considered as part of the scrutiny process (it was noted that in November an offer had been made to establish a Cross Party Member Working Group to discuss this issue which would report back to scrutiny). He felt that this report was opportunistic and expressed his concern that the report had been received late and Members had to receive a Group briefing without sight of this information. In addition, it had been discovered a few weeks previously that staff had already been requested to empty their desks at the Civic Centre prior to a decision being taken on the proposed future working arrangements and said that this was unforgiveable.

With regard to the report, the Leader of the Labour Group said that this could be viewed in different ways, whilst chief officers and the leadership felt that it was ambitious and forward looking, it could be and elements could be useful in the future, however, the country was still in a state of flux. Only two days previously, the country had marked the one-year anniversary of the start of the pandemic and going forward in another year there would be a greater understanding of the implications of the virus/pandemic and whether there could be a possible return to a physical meeting environment.

The Leader of the Labour Group continued by stating that this model of working (which had already been alluded to) may not suit some staff. Stories had been heard throughout the course of the pandemic about people suffering with mental health issues and posed the following questions:

- Did the trade unions totally support the report?
- Reference was made to the Workplace Transformation Programme that had taken place at Anvil Court and the Civic Centre in 2015 at a cost of £2.5m. A proportion of this cost (£750,000) had been funded via prudential borrowing. What was the current status of these repayments on the sum borrowed and should the Civic Centre demolished and the land sold, what would be implications on this prudential borrowing i.e. would it need to be re-paid in full?

The Managing Director advised in terms of scrutiny for this and previous reports had been submitted directly to Council as these were issues for all Members to scrutinise and political groups had been given the opportunity to be briefed on the current report both prior to and post the report being published.

With regard to the staff decanting the Civic Centre, no instruction had been provided for this to take place – preparation work for the decant was being planned in the background and this work had been approved by Council last November.

In terms of the Trade Unions – the Branch Secretary and Branch Chair of the Joint Trade Unions were members of the Working Group and had been involved in the discussions around the operating model and were supportive of the proposals. The Managing Director added that if the unions had been in attendance at Council they would agree that it was imperative going forward that strong engagement and consultation took place with the trade unions and staff to ensure that those staff who had difficulties with this way of working were not compelled to do so going forward.

The Chief Officer Resources at this juncture advised that she would be unable to confirm specifically if the prudential borrowing for the Workplace Transformation Programme had been re-paid because individual loans were not highlighted due to loans being regularly repaid and new loans taken out at better rates. However, she was able to confirm that when the original prudential borrowing for the Workplace Transformation Programme had been taken out, the relevant level of savings had been identified to repay that loan and, therefore, there should be no additional impact on the council taxpayer should the proposal proceed.

The Leader of the Labour Group disagreed with this response and advised that at that time a report had been presented for the Workplace Transformation Programme costing £2.5m it had been pointed out that loans had to be repaid, and so inevitably some of this debt would fall on the council taxpayer.

He continued by stating that he had additional concerns regarding Item No. 41 – Ebbw Valley Railway which alluded to an increase in commuters using trains but the premise of this report was requesting the opposite i.e. for people to remain at home. The Leader of the Labour Group felt that this was a rushed judgement because there could be implications and a change of direction for local government depending on the outcome of the Welsh Government elections on 6th May, 2021. In addition, there had been a considerable amount of disharmony over time regarding Anvil Court and this report would tie the Council into another long term arrangement. He concluded by stating that this matter should be revisited in 12 months which, would provide the opportunity for the report to be scrutinise in light of the knowledge of the political outlook

in Wales, knowledge of the pandemic and the impact and implications that the virus was and continued to have on residents. The Leader of the Labour Group advised that he would propose an alternative recommendation at the appropriate juncture.

- Reservations were expressed regarding the removable desk provision and how this would be achieved for blended meetings when, other local authority meeting venues had been set up for blended meetings with fixed desks and the relevant I.T. infrastructure. Concern was also expressed that the rooms at the General Offices would no longer be available for hire and this would result in a loss of rental income for the facility.

The Member continued by referring to the new lease for Anvil Court and the comments that had been made in the Group briefing that 'the Council would be in a strong position to obtain lower rent'. She enquired how this could be achieved when there would only be one building available for office accommodation. She added that the report should have been scrutinised in depth as there were numerous questions that remained unanswered and in order that a directive could have been given to officers to investigate other accommodation options including building a purpose built facility at the rear of the General Offices.

The Managing Director advised that the business case that had been considered by Council in November had contained an option to construct a new purpose built office but it was felt that this was not a cost effective option at that time and Council had not instructed officers to carry out any further work on this particular option.

In reply to a comment, the Managing Director advised that she had made a statement at the Group briefing that officers had not received a directive to explore building on other sites because at that time Members had not wanted to pursue a new build. However, this was still a valid option contained within the business case irrespective of the decision that had been taken relating to Festival Park.

In response to the question relating to Anvil Court, the Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services advised that he had stated that the Council would be in a '*strong*' position to negotiate with the landlord not a 'better' position. It was noted that the discussion relating to the lease of Anvil Court had commenced early as there were several more years to run on the existing lease and this would allow for alternative provision to be identified should an agreement not be reached.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial confirmed that work was currently underway to relocate the Democratic Hub to the General Offices but given the current national regulations, social distancing was still required. Some Committees under a social distanced landscape would only be able to be held in one venue, and investigations were taking place to set up one of the rooms permanently that would be used as a main Committee venue. A mobile delegate system had also been acquired for use at these meetings.

The Member expressed her concern regarding the timing of the proposal and that accommodation was being provided for 42 Councillors whilst there could potentially be a reduction in the number of Councillors following the next election due to the Local Government Boundary Review and this may incur unnecessary expenditure.

- Another Member referred to significant refurbishments that had taken place at the Civic Centre including the Leader's Office during this term of office and said that surely before this investment was made the chief officers and senior Members must have realised that they were 'throwing good money after bad' given that there had been plans in existence since 2012 to use the General Offices. He concluded by stating that no forethought had been gone into these proposals.

The Leader of the Council referred to the expenditure on the Civic Centre and stated that several reports had been considered which had been agreed in September, October and November to progress with the Democratic Hub and Community Hub and the November report which contained a statement that had not been challenged, alluded to the fact that the Civic Centre only had an estimated shelf life of 4 years

remaining. He pointed out that if he had been advised in 2017 that the building had a limited shelf life, the work would not have been undertaken on the former Mayor's Parlour and Dining Room and an alternative solution identified.

He continued by advising, however, that the bulk of the expenditure had been incurred was to rectify outdated electrical work. As a result, a room had been created for the Leader and a more acceptable working space created for the Leader's support officer. In addition, the Labour Group for the first time had been provided with an office and meeting space and the former Mayor's Dining Room had been turned into a meeting room for the benefit of every Councillor and officer to use. It was noted that since the 2014 workplace transformation, meeting accommodation had been at a premium. The alternative had been to leave these rooms empty or use them for the collective benefit of everyone including the Labour Group.

For the first time, when distinguished guests such as Ministers visited the authority they were able to meet at the Civic Centre rather than travelling to the General Offices due to the general condition of the democratic area – therefore, this was not lavish expenditure in reality.

In terms of the report, the Leader of the Council concluded by stating that officers had carried out the decision that Council had taken in November and were now presenting their findings.

- It was acknowledged that the Civic Centre was no longer fit for purpose but concern was expressed that the Community Hubs should feed into a central office and this was also required for staff cohesion. The Member was concerned that local government was deteriorating and felt that residents would not be able to obtain services via the Community Hubs and would feel ostracised. Whilst he saw the merits of disposing of the Civic Centre he asked whether the merits of constructing a new headquarters could be investigated which, would be far more effective.

The Managing Director again referred to the business case that was considered last year and pointed out that the cost of

creating a new build would require a significant investment beyond the receipt that would be received for the Civic Centre.

- A Member in his opinion said that the report was about reducing costs and meeting government targets. It did not consider the practicalities of everyday life and the type of accommodation (small terraced housing) that most families in the area lived in. He pointed out that the reason the virus had spread so quickly during the height of the pandemic was because people were visiting each other's homes because they lived in close knit communities. Most staff did not have space available within their homes for a separate office or suitable housing for working from home. He felt that far more consideration should have been given to the report including scrutiny and other options considered around Anvil Court and the General Offices.

The Managing Director advised that there was an acceptance that this working model would not suit all staff and appropriate adjustments could be made if staff were unable to work from home on a permanent basis.

- Another Member agreed with the principle of the idea of Community Hubs however, he alluded to the Council's portfolio of properties that were available in and around town centres that could potentially be suitable and user friendly to accommodate these hubs and requested that these details be made available to Members. In addition, the portfolio of properties could be looked at to ascertain if alternative provision could be identified rather than using Anvil Court which whilst not a council owned building, the Council had incurred a considerable amount of expenditure maintaining.

The Corporate Director confirmed he would be able to provide information on the portfolio of properties if Council determined but highlighted that if alternative venues were to be investigate this would change the timescales of the proposals. It was noted that it was proposed that the Community Hubs were co-locate with the libraries.

- The full information had not been provided i.e. what alternatives had the Working Group considered and a Member could not understand the reason why a Cross Party Member

Working Group had not been established to consider the new operating model. Concern was also expressed that trade would be depleted in Ebbw Vale town centre if the Civic Centre closed. The Member concluded by requesting that the costs of this proposal together with the other alternative options be provided.

The Corporate Director advised that the alternative proposals had been included within the business case that had been considered by Council in November. In reply to a request, the Managing Director confirmed that the business case would be re-circulated to all Members.

- Another Member said that suggestions had been made during the Group briefings that if the agile working model was agreed applicants could be attracted to vacant jobs from all over the country and expressed his concern that if happened this could result in a detrimental impact on the community and the job prospects of the young people within the area.

Whilst it had been stipulated that £180,000 capital allocation would be required for the Democratic/Community Hubs, no other specific costs had been supplied in terms of the relocation/moving costs for other departments or indeed details of where they would be located. In addition, if there was an element of prudential borrowing associated with the Civic Centre, confirmation was required whether the loan would have to be re-paid and the impact this would have on the proceeds of any sale. He pointed out that potentially the land could take a considerable time to be sold.

The Managing Director advised that departments were not relocating - this was a different way of operating and job roles would be designated agile, home or community worker. All services would have a mixture of homeworking and agile working and when staff worked from an office base they would be working alongside colleagues from other service areas - it was a corporate operating model.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that since the Leader of the Labour Group had asked the original question she had made some enquiries regarding prudential borrowing and confirmed that a loan of approximately £700,000 had been

taken out for a 25-year period to fund the Workplace Transformation Programme. Whilst this loan had not been repaid, none of the borrowing that had been undertaken had been specifically linked to the Civic Centre so there were no restrictions/legal barriers on the Council that would result in the building not being able to be demolished and the land sold.

In reply to a question regarding social clauses being incorporated within jobs terms and conditions to protect the community and the young people, the Managing Director advised that legislation would prevent this approach.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services reported that there had been a seismic shift in the employment market and the way in which everyone worked and said that opportunities would open up for young people and existing staff within the global economy which, could now be accessed from home. He pointed out that there was strong evidence to suggest that people who were homeworking spent their money locally.

- This was an ideal opportunity to bring the Council into the 21st century and be sustainable going forward. From the survey results, staff had been very positive about agile working and this would provide inclusivity for those who had varying abilities. This opportunity should be used to the benefit the staff and members of the public.

Following a lengthy discussion,

The Leader of the Council, thereupon proposed that Option 1 be endorsed. This proposal was seconded.

The Leader of the Labour Group, on behalf of the Labour and Minority Independent Group, thereupon, proposed the following **alternative recommendation:**

To defer the decision for 12 months taking into account the following:

- **The need to gain a better understanding of where the country would be in another year with regard to the pandemic.**

- **Persistent concerns around the conditions at Anvil Court and the lease arrangement.**
- **Possible change of political direction at the Senedd regarding the future of local government.**
- **The lack of proper scrutiny on the project, particularly on the impact of homeworking on staff.**

This alternative proposal was seconded.

A recorded vote was, therefore, requested.

In Favour of the alternative proposal – Councillors P. Baldwin, D. Bevan, M. Cross, P. Edwards, L. Elias, K. Hayden, M. Holland, H. McCarthy, J. Millard, J. C. Morgan, K. Pritchard, T. Sharrem, T. Smith, S. Thomas, H. Trollope, D. Wilkshire, B. Willis, L. Winnett.

Against the alternative proposal – Councillors J. Collins, M. Cook, N. Daniels, D. Davies, G. A. Davies, G. L. Davies, M. Day, D. Hancock, S. Healy, J. Hill, W. Hodgins, J. Holt, J. Mason, C. Meredith, M. Moore, J. P. Morgan, L. Parsons, G. Paulsen, K. Rowson, B. Summers, B. Thomas, G. Thomas, J. Wilkins.

The vote on the alternative proposal was not carried.

It was, therefore, proposed and seconded that **Option 1 (preferred option) be endorsed and approved.** As no Member had abstained from voting, a further recorded vote was not required and Option 1 **was carried.**

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the new Operating Model based on Agile Working, Democratic Hub and Community Hubs be approved and work could now proceed to decommission the Civic Centre.

37. MOTION – FREE SCHOOL MEALS

The Council considered the following Motion from Unite Wales.

Whilst the move by Welsh Government to extend the provision of free school meals (FSMs) to those currently eligible until Easter

2022 including school holidays was welcomed, this unfortunately meant that not all those children living in households on benefits, whether universal credit, working tax credits or legacy benefits, due to the threshold being set at £7,400 or monthly earnings were less than £610, actually meant that more in poverty go-without than get.

The Council therefore unanimously RESOLVED that:

- It recognised the distressing fact that 30% of children in Wales live in poverty and yet just 13% were entitled to free school meals This was mainly because the remaining 17% of children live in low paid households that took them just over the present eligibility criteria.
- It noted that England and Scotland have universal infant FSMs with all Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 pupils eligible, which was not the case in Wales.
- The Welsh Government be called upon to cost, budget and provide as a matter of urgency, the extension of FSMs to all children who lived in poverty in Wales but were excluded from entitlement under the present eligibility criteria.
- It agreed that no child should go hungry and that this should be a step towards the aim of rolling out universal FSMs to all children in Wales as called for by various groups in Wales, including Child Poverty Action Group and the People's Assembly Wales

38. MEMBERSHIPS REPORT

Consideration was given to:

(a)

Aneurin Bevan Community Health Council

- to appoint a replacement representative.

The Leader advised that he had received no nominations for this position at this point in time and extended an invitation to other Group Leaders to submit expressions of interest.

	<p><u>Advisory Panel for Local Authority School Governors</u></p> <p>The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 4th March, 2021 to appoint:</p> <p>Deighton Primary Schools – Councillor H. Trollope & Delyth Pearsall</p> <p>Pen Y Cwm Special School – Tim Baxter</p> <p>Beaufort Hill Primary School – Frances Lynch</p> <p>Cwm Primary School - Kathryn Cross</p> <p>Ystruth Primary School – Kerys Beese</p> <p>Abertillery Learning Community – Jack Newtown</p> <p>River Centre - Raymond Harris, Lee Powell & Jan English</p> <p>Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously, RESOLVED that the above appointments be endorsed.</p>
<p>39.</p>	<p><u>EXEMPT ITEMS</u></p> <p>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).</p>
<p>40.</p>	<p><u>NMC SITE, BRYNMAWR</u></p> <p>Councillor J. C. Morgan declared an interest in this item but remained in the meeting whilst it was considered but took no part in the discussion.</p>

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).

Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager – Business and Regeneration.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services spoke and provided details of the scope and background of the project. This information was detailed in sections 2.1 – 2.11 of the report.

In reply to a question, the Corporate Director advised that he was unaware of any particular insurance that could be taken out to indemnify the risk but said that this could be explored. However, it was noted that a premium would have to be paid for this type of insurance which had not been budgeted for.

The Executive Member – Regeneration and Economic Development expressed his appreciation to officers for bringing this project to fruition and proposed that Option 2 be endorsed.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report which related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) be accepted and Option 2 be endorsed, namely that the Deed of Priority be authorised allowing the project to proceed.

A Ward Member expressed his appreciation to Council for supporting this project which, would allow a currently derelict brownfield site back into operation.

41. EBBW VALLEY RAILWAY

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).

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Corporate Director gave details of the proposal which would assist with the implementation of the infrastructure necessary to achieve the objective of both Welsh Government and the Council of increasing service frequency. It was noted that the loan would be interest free and would not be taken out until due diligence and the establishment of a Joint Venture arrangement had been agreed – should this not be agreed the monies would be repaid in full.

The views of Members were, thereupon, sought (summarised below) and were responded to by the Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services/Chief Officer Resources:

- A Member indicated that he would only support the proposal if the Newport link was guaranteed and that work be undertaken in partnership with Caerphilly and Newport and the financial burden was shared between the three authorities.

The Member acknowledged the opportunity of an Abertillery spur but pointed out that Abertillery town centre had been ravaged during the pandemic with shop closures and asked whether an impact assessment would be undertaken to assess any potential impact that this would have on existing businesses. He concluded by stating that increasing the number of trains to 4 per hour may be too many and could potentially make the line unviable at a future point in time.

The Corporate Director advised that there had been some considerable debate when the railway had first opened regarding passenger patronage and this modelling had been based on known patronage levels – the WeITAG Study would determine if patronage numbers were realistic. With regards to the town centre, this would be reassessed to determine how the town could be changed over time to maximise the opportunities between the town and rail link. It was noted that an economic impact assessment would be undertaken, as part of the project.

The work in terms of the Newport link would be reliant on a third party and this would be incorporated as part of the Joint Venture agreement which would set out key deliverables for the project. In terms of partnership working with the other two authorities, there was no reason why the three councils could not work together to maximise the benefits going forward and the Corporate Director said that this could form part of future engagement.

In reply to a question regarding risk in terms of an increase in the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) it was confirmed that if the loan was accepted and the Joint Venture was not agreed, the funding could be repaid so there would be no risk implications for the Council. However, if the income stream was achievable, the MRP provision would not be required.

- The Leader of the Labour Group expressed his concern regarding a potential increase in the MRP as there would already be an uplift of £1.8m for 2022/2023. Whilst he was not opposed to the proposal he advised that he would propose an alternative recommendation at the appropriate juncture.
- It was pointed out that whilst people were working from home there would be less commuters using trains and concern was expressed that the authority would not be able to recoup the monies and this could result in a large liability for Blaenau Gwent, which was a deprived area. Therefore, the funding commitment should be shared between all the councils that would benefit from the proposal. The Member felt that the situation should be assessed currently and post Covid and said that now was not the right time to make the decision.

Councillor W. Hodgins left the meeting at this juncture.

The Corporate Director advised that patronage was key and Welsh Government had undertaken their own due diligence on the modelling work and he gave an assurance that there would be no impact on the council taxpayer for Blaenau Gwent for any repayment. He emphasised that the loan could not be received until the Joint Venture agreement had been established.

- Another Member said that the funding should be utilised to improve the connectivity and transport infrastructure within the County Borough as a whole. This would enable residents to travel to employment opportunities with the County Borough and this should be given a higher priority. In addition, the proposal could potentially place a financial burden on the next administration and the Member felt that it was not the time to make this decision.
- Reference was made to the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal projects and that the Abertillery spur project had been held in abeyance and said that further clarity was required on this proposal.

The Corporate Director advised that the Abertillery spur and the Metro formed part of the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal projects – this proposal was a separate project funded by Welsh Government. The City Deal Abertillery spur project had been held in abeyance at the present time because it formed part of a larger project. He emphasised that if the Council determined not to partake in the venture, the funding would ultimately be returned to U.K. government - it was noted that separate applications had already been made to the U.K. government for funding for this project. This opportunity would provide an ability to future proof the project into next financial year subject to a Joint Venture agreement. This could then be synchronising with the City Deal project for the Abertillery spur.

The Chief Officer Resources stated that she understood the financial concerns that had been raised by Members and advised that should the proposal be approved, a Joint Venture agreement would then be developed in the next 3 months with

other parties in order that sufficient income would be achieved, however, should a Joint Venture agreement not be reached the monies would be repaid immediately without any impact on the council taxpayer.

- A Member requested that the Leader open dialogue with the Leaders of Caerphilly County Borough and Newport City Councils regarding an agreement to work in partnership. He also asked whether the Leader shared his concern regarding the potential detrimental effect that this could have on the town centre of Abertillery.

The Leader of the Council advised that if the report was agreed and it would be of benefit to the project and the Council he would liaise and open dialogue with the Leaders of Newport and Caerphilly as requested. He referred to the points and concern that had been raised and advised that he had also raised similar points and had sought assurances regarding the proposal. Whilst a decision was required on the offer of funding, the major decision would be taken by Council when Members considered the detail contained within the Joint Venture agreement.

The Leader continued by stating that he had concerns around every town centre and the Council had very little or no control regarding business closures and wanted to see a thriving Blaenau Gwent. He pointed out that these were issues of concern throughout the region and advised that colleagues in Newport and Cardiff were also concerned about the effect the pandemic would have on town centre shopping. A fresh approach was required for some of the town centres and work was underway on this – a Town Centre Strategy had already been adopted. Whilst his priority would always be as a Ward Councillor for Abertillery, in his capacity as Leader of the Council his overarching priority was for the general wellbeing of Blaenau Gwent as a whole.

In reply to a question the Corporate Director reported that budgetary controls would form part of the Joint Venture agreement.

The Executive Member – Regeneration & Economic Development said that the Joint Venture agreement would include details around

all the concerns and points that had been raised and advised that the protection of the council was paramount throughout the process. He referred to a recent announcement made by the Minister and said there was a new focus on connectivity and work had commenced on this and included investment in other valley lines to improve services. In terms of town centres, work had already commenced on looking at new and different options.

The Leader of the Labour Group pointed out that the reports should be presented by Executive Members in the future.

Following a lengthy discussion, the Executive Member Regeneration & Economic Development proposed that Option 1 be endorsed. This proposal was seconded.

Councillor W. Hodgins returned to the meeting midway through the alternative proposals being discussed.

The Leader of the Labour Group, on behalf of the Labour and Minority Independent Group, thereupon, proposed the following **alternative recommendation:**

The content of Option One be supported with the following stipulations added:

- **The Newport link was a firm commitment.**
- **That Blaenau Gwent would not carry the burden of the arrangement alone and that discussions with Newport and Caerphilly open immediately.**
- **Further detailed assurance and projections showing that income from the extra trains would cover Blaenau Gwent's loan repayments were produced for Members to examine, and that Members were given more time, with reports provided, to scrutinise the project.**
- **A detailed analysis to give assurance around the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) repayments highlighted in the report.**

This alternative proposal was seconded.

A recorded vote was, therefore, requested.

In Favour of the alternative proposal – Councillors P. Baldwin, D. Bevan, M. Cross, P. Edwards, L. Elias, K. Hayden, H. McCarthy, J. Millard, M. Moore, J. C. Morgan, K. Pritchard, T. Sharrem, T. Smith, S. Thomas, H. Trollope, B. Willis, L. Winnett.

Against the alternative proposal – Councillors J. Collins, M. Cook, N. Daniels, D. Davies, G. A. Davies, G. L. Davies, M. Day, D. Hancock, M. Holland, S. Healy, J. Hill, J. Holt, J. Mason, C. Meredith, J. P. Morgan, L. Parsons, G. Paulsen, K. Rowson, B. Summers, G. Thomas, J. Wilkins.

Abstention – Councillor W. Hodgins

The vote on the alternative proposal was not carried.

As there was no stated intention voiced from any Member present, to oppose Option 1, the proposed course of action in not proceeding to a recorded individual vote on the preferred option was acceptable.

It was, therefore, 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 Option 1 be endorsed, namely that:

- (i) the offer of the funding as set out in the report be accepted and authority be delegated to the Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services, and the Chief Officer Resources, to negotiate on behalf of the Council and act as a signatory to the funding agreement.
- (ii) the Council engaged with relevant parties to develop a Joint Venture arrangement for agreement at a future Council meeting.
- (iii) the Council agreed to the amended prudential indicators in relation to the Authority's external debt limits i.e. Authorised Limit and Operational Boundary (attached as Appendix1).

<p>42.</p>	<p>Item numbers 42 and 43 were considered simultaneously.</p> <p><u>SHORTLISTING – JNC OFFICERS</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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).</p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the meeting held on 3rd March, 2021.</p> <p>It was unanimously,</p> <p>RESOLVED that the report which related to staffing matters be accepted and the decisions contained therein be noted.</p>
<p>43.</p>	<p><u>APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE – JNC OFFICERS</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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).</p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the meeting held on 11th March, 2021</p> <p>It was unanimously,</p> <p>RESOLVED that the report which related to staffing matters be accepted and</p>

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- the post of Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change be offered to Claire Gardner on a salary in accordance with JNC 1 (£51,407 - £56,544).- The post of Service Manager Young People & Partnerships be offered to Joanne Sims on a salary in accordance with JNC 1 (£51,407 - £56,544). | |
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