

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

SUBJECT: CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 22ND OCTOBER, 2021

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. HEALY (CHAIR)

Councillors: M. Cook
P. Baldwin
G.A. Davies
L. Elias
J. Hill
J. Holt
H. McCarthy
C. Meredith
G. Paulsen
T. Smith
B. Summers (substitute for Cllr J.P. Morgan)
S. Thomas

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Corporate Director of Education
Head of Organisational Development
Service Manager Policy & Partnerships
Service Manager Accountancy
Professional Lead for Engagement, Equality & Welsh Language
Community Cohesion Coordinator (West Gwent)
Health & Safety Officer
Press & Publicity Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ALSO: Charlotte Owen, Wales Audit Office

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<p><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
No. 2	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, J.P. Morgan.</p> <p>Chief Officer Resources Chief Officer Commercial & Customer</p>	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 10th September, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>SPECIAL CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Special Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 21st September, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 6	<p><u>ACTION SHEET</u></p> <p>The action sheet referred from the Joint Budget Scrutiny Committee on 27th September, 2021 was submitted.</p>	

	<p>A Member commented on the poor sound quality in the Abraham Derby Room at the General Offices. The Chair advised that he would bring this to the attention of senior officers.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<p>No. 7</p>	<p><u>AUDIT WALES - FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT - BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which presented the outcome of the assessment undertaken by Audit Wales relating to the Financial Sustainability of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council.</p> <p>The Audit Wales Officer spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein. She informed Members that the report sets out the findings of their financial sustainability review at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. It was a piece of work undertaken with all Councils across Wales to look at financial sustainability and local government, particularly in the context of the COVID pandemic.</p> <p>A Member commented that these had been good financial years for the Authority due to good settlements from the Welsh Government, hardship funding had helped put the Council in a good position, but felt this could be a false position as the Bridging the Gap Programme was untested as Members had not seen a full year results due to the pandemic. He felt that the liquidity issue needed to be borne in mind and the Authority needed to be careful in relation to too much borrowing. He said it was a good report but had been heavily impacted by Welsh Government funding and commended the good work of the financial team.</p> <p>Another Member agreed that it was a good report but had concerns regarding the use of the hardship funding and felt that some of this funding should have been used to help communities with CCTV and public safety issues. He felt that less money should have been put into reserves and more put into CCTV services to keep communities safe throughout the winter months.</p>	

The Chair informed the Committee that a report on CCTV would be presented to a future meeting of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

The Service Manager Accountancy said that the hardship fund was a grant with terms and conditions, CCTV and Community Safety was not part of those terms and conditions. All the money spent from the hardship fund complied with those terms and conditions and was all about responding to the pandemic. She advised that there was some funding from the hardship fund that went to the community via statutory sick pay enhancements and social care payments.

A Member thanked the Audit Office for the positive report even though the impacts of COVID highlighted in the report were not fully known. He felt that at this point in time the proactive actions of the Council had put it in a very strong position to meet future financial challenges and saw this as a very positive endorsement from the Audit Office.

In response to a Member's question regarding the working capital ratio, the Audit Wales Officer said there wasn't an ideal number that the Authority should be aiming to achieve, it depended on the specific circumstances at each Council and the approach that they may want to take. She felt it was about Members gaining assurance that although this figure was low, was the Council in a position where it could meet its liabilities as and when they needed to be dealt with. It was mentioned in the report that the Council were prompt in paying its debts to ensure that it was supporting the local economy, in that way, that did impact on the liquidity figures. As such some local policies like that would impact and bring the Authority's score down.

A Member referred to page 30 paragraph 9 of the report - *In total, the Council anticipates it will receive approximately £12.2 million of additional funding from the Welsh Government in 2020-21. This is set out in Exhibit 2 below. The total excludes funding where the Council acts as an agent, distributing funds from the Welsh Government to third parties.* He enquired regarding clarification on third parties. The Audit Wales Officer clarified that this related to money from the Welsh Government given to the Authority

	<p>to distribute to third parties such as local businesses, this money was not included in the figure as the Council was unable to keep it and had to distribute it on behalf of the Welsh Government.</p> <p>The Chair endorsed the Members comments and said it was a good report and clearly demonstrated the Authority's long term financial commitment and showed that the Authority was moving in the right direction. He thanked the Audit Wales Officer for presenting the report and the financial team.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the findings of the Audit Wales report, as detailed in the report and appendix be accepted.</p>	
<p>No. 8</p>	<p><u>WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION STRATEGY 2022-27</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Professional Lead for Engagement, Equality & Welsh Language which was presented to set out the intentions for developing the Council's second Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022-27, in accordance with the Welsh Language Standards (2015) (Standard 145).</p> <p>The Professional Lead for Engagement, Equality & Welsh Language spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the proposed approach for developing the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022-27 be accepted.</p>	
<p>No. 9</p>	<p><u>HEALTH & SAFETY ANNUAL REPORT 1ST APRIL 2020 TO 31ST MARCH 2021</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development which was presented to give Members of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the Authority's Health and Safety and Fire Safety at work performance for 2020/21.</p>	

The Head of Organisational Development spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein. She informed Members that the report also included a section in relation to the Council's response to the pandemic.

A Member referred to the report summary and enquired regarding non-employee accidents and the decrease in staff absence. The Health & Safety Officer explained that non-employee accidents included school pupil accidents, members of the public in Council premises and service users in Social Services premises. The Head of Organisational Development referred to staff sickness absence and explained that it had reduced but was not below target, they were in the process of verifying quarter two sickness statistics and those figures would be reported through the Finance and Performance report and would be presented to a future meeting of this Committee.

With regard to the Service Level Agreement with Aneurin Leisure Trust a Member enquired why the data for the work by the Health and Safety Advisors for the Trust was not included in this report. The Health & Safety Officer explained that this was the annual report for the Council as an employer, the Leisure Trust was a separate employer and as such their data was not included in this report.

In response to a Member's question regarding Figure 1 on page 131 - the 3 year trend for employee accidents in the Authority by department, the Health & Safety Officer said the significant drop in the number of accidents in the Education Department for 2020/21 was due to school closures over a significant time during that financial year.

A Member noted that the numbers of accidents that occurred in the Environment Department fell despite the fact the Department continuing to work as normal throughout the pandemic. The Health & Safety Officer said there was no apparent trend regarding the decrease, however, it was a positive outcome.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee support the annual review of

	<p>the performance of Health and Safety and Fire Safety performance and the recommendations made.</p>	
<p>No. 10</p>	<p><u>UPDATE ON UK RESETTLEMENT AND ASYLUM SEEKER DISPERSAL SCHEMES</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial and Customer which was presented to provide an update on participation supporting the UK Resettlement scheme (which recently has included supporting the resettlement of Afghan nationals), and seek support for the participation in the Home Office Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme prior to being presented to Executive.</p> <p>The Community Cohesion Coordinator spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein. The report outlined the ongoing pressure on the asylum system had been increasing steadily for years. With the increase in the number of asylum seekers needing to be accommodated nationally, there had been an added pressure on existing dispersal areas and in response the Home Office had prioritised widening dispersal areas and were keen to work in partnership with local authorities.</p> <p>A Member said he supported this report and commented that the Syrian families who had resettled in his ward were a fantastic addition to the community.</p> <p>Another Member said he had been involved in the resettlement programme for the Syrian refugees and felt that had been a success, he congratulated the officers on the work that had been undertaken and supported the report.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Notes the progress made in participation with the UK resettlement, including most recently the Afghan resettlement programme; and ii. Supports the proposal to participate in the Widening Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme as a pilot, prior to being presented to Executive. 	

No. 11

FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 3RD DECEMBER, 2021

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

The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the meeting on 3rd December, 2021 be approved.