

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO:	<u>THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL</u>
SUBJECT:	<u>ORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL – 27TH JANUARY, 2022</u>
REPORT OF:	<u>DEMOCRATIC OFFICER</u>

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HOLT (THE CHAIR,
PRESIDING)

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

G. Thomas
S. Thomas
H. Trollope
J. Wilkins
D. Wilkshire
B. Willis
L. Winnett

AND: Managing Director
Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Education
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Chief Officer Resources
Chief Officer Commercial & Customer
Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance
Head of Governance & Partnerships
Head of Regeneration
Service Manager – Community Services
Communications and Marketing Manager
Press and Publicity Officer
Policy Officer (Engagement & Equality)

ALSO: Darcey Howell – Outgoing Youth Mayor

<u>No.</u>	<u>SUBJECT</u>	<u>ACTION</u>
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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>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors N. Daniels, L. Elias and B. Thomas.</p>	
3.	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>The following declarations of interest were reported:</p> <p>Item No. 25: Waste Transfer Station and Household Waste Recycling Centre</p> <p>Councillors M. Cook and B. Summers</p>	
4.	<p><u>OUTGOING YOUTH MAYOR – DARCEY HOWELL</u></p> <p>A warm welcome was extended to Darcey Howell, outgoing Youth Mayor of Blaenau Gwent.</p> <p>Darcey commenced that stating that it was a huge privilege to be able to speak to Council about what she had achieved being Youth Mayor and to highlight some of the amazing opportunities that had been presented to her.</p> <p>Darcey explained that she had joined the Youth Forum back in 2018 as a little year 7. By 2019 she had managed to pluck up the courage and stand for Deputy Youth Mayor. Little did she know at the time what she was in for and what she would get up to in the next few years. When elected, Darcey had decided that her priority would be improving mental health through sport and physical activity. She had chosen this priority because it fitted nicely into the priority of the previous Youth Mayor, Charlotte and the overall Forum priority of mental health and also because she was a very sporty and active person and an active participant in her swimming club (also Vice-Captain) and netball club. However, Darcey did recognised that not all young people had the opportunity to do this and she had tried to raise awareness that physical activity was not just about being part of a club or gym, it took many forms.</p>	

Darcey attended a local community gym with her mother and recognised that some of the equipment would not be suitable for the younger age group. She worked with the owner of the gym to submit a Cash4U funding application for sporting equipment so that young people could take part in a Youth Academy Programme which involved volunteering. The funding bid was successful and all the equipment was purchased on behalf of the gym. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic hit and the project did not go according to plan and the Youth Academy Programme was put on hold. In September 2021 Darcey together with members of the Youth Forum attended the gym to take part in a session using the new equipment that was purchased as part of the bid and was pleased to report the first parts of this programme had now started with 16 young people signed up and 20 youth sessions having been delivered to date. Darcey had also recently submitted another funding bid for the swimming club she trained at – this would provide training for the members, enable them to volunteer as coaches and would also provide new equipment such as medicine balls and diving blocks.

Being part of the Youth Forum had also provided Darcey with a platform to be involved in many opportunities, one being the first Climate Change Assembly in Wales. In January 2021 as Youth Mayor, she along with another member of the Youth Forum, Mara had been asked to be part of the planning group for the Climate Change Assembly. This involved attending regular meetings, working with different partners across the council, outside agencies and the community of Blaenau Gwent. The Climate Change Assembly had taken place over two weekends in March 2021. This saw members of the community come together to look at tackling Climate Change as whole but, more importantly focussing on what could be done in Blaenau Gwent towards this and voting on the key issues to take forward. Darcey supported the running of the sessions by offering IT support, managing the lobby for Zoom as well as participating alongside her peers as a speaker at the event. The forum representatives highlighted simple changes that people could make to everyday lives towards tackling Climate Change.

This experience had allowed Darcey to meet with many different people, work on something she felt very passionate about, gain new skills and took her out of her comfort zone but she was pleased to announce that she would continue to be part of this work going forward.

However, Darcey's journey as Youth Mayor didn't stop there. Being part of the Youth Forum had enabled her to be a part of:

- Consultations around issues such as mental health, policing, wellbeing, democracy and making sure that children and young people's voices were heard.
- Campaigns such as International Women's Day, Show Racism the Red Card and awareness around the Census.
- Regional Youth Forum, chairing the Police Commissioner's Question Time event and being part of the COVID recovery planning for young people.
- Involvement in an interview panel for the youth service and she had helped to develop the Body Image Campaign alongside the Youth Forum, which had won the best scientific and educational film in the first International Film Festival of Wales

Darcey concluded by thanking Members for their support and for listening to her democracy journey to date.

The Chair said despite the Covid pandemic, Darcey had achieved a tremendous amount during her year in office. Darcey's energy and commitment was to be applauded and the Chair expressed her best wishes to Darcey for the future.

Members echoed these comments and pointed out that mental health and wellbeing for young people was tremendously important especially during the pandemic and Darcey was congratulated on taking this forward as her priority for the year and commended on her truly inspirational journey to date. Members expressed their best wishes to Darcey for her future endeavours.

Another Member commenced by stating that he was not being disrespectful to the Chair of the Council who was doing an excellent job but said he really appreciated the role of Mayor of Blaenau Gwent, which should never have been disregarded. The role of Mayor of Blaenau Gwent was an integral part of running the County Borough and said he hoped that this role would be reinstated at some point in the future in order to continue to carry out a role in a similar vein to Darcey, who he commended for the work she had undertaken during her time as Youth Mayor.

5. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

(a) **Welcome**

A warm welcome was extended to Councillor David Wilkshire.

Councillor Wilkshire took the opportunity to express his appreciation to Members and officers for the kind messages he had received during this difficult time.

(b) **Illness**

Although an apology for absence had been received, a welcome was extended Councillor Lyn Elias following his surgery.

(c) **Armed Forces Gold Award**

The Chair announced that the Council had been notified that it had been successful in achieving the Armed Forces Gold Award and in the absence of the Armed Forces Champion, advised that the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award reflected the Council's long standing commitment to supporting the Armed Forces Community. The Council valued the transferable skills that service leavers and reservists brought to delivering public services to the communities. The Council was delighted to receive this recognition and were committed to continuing this work.

The Gold Award recognised the work the Council had done putting in place supportive employment policies for Veterans, Reserves, and families of those serving in the Armed Forces and actively promoting job opportunities at the authority to the Armed Forces community.

The Award also reflected the Council's wider commitment to supporting the Armed Forces community in Blaenau Gwent, including:

- providing training to over 200 front-line staff about identifying and supporting the needs of the current and former service members and their families; and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> revising the housing policy to ensure that service leavers and their partners were not disadvantaged when applying for housing when they returned to civilian life in Blaenau Gwent. 	
(d)	<p><u>Item No. 25 – Waste Transfer Station and Household Waste Recycling Centre</u></p> <p>The Managing Director advised that the above item had been deferred and would be considered at a Special Meeting of the Council, which was scheduled to be held on 7th February, 2022.</p>	
6. – 18.	<p><u>MINUTE BOOK – OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2021</u></p> <p>The Minute Book for the period October – December, 2021 was submitted for consideration.</p> <p>It was unanimously,</p> <p>RESOLVED that the minutes be approved and confirmed as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
19.	<p><u>MEMBERS QUESTIONS</u></p> <p>There were no questions submitted by Members.</p>	
20.	<p><u>PUBLIC QUESTIONS</u></p> <p>There were no questions submitted by members of the public.</p>	
21.	<p><u>TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW REPORT – 1ST APRIL, 2021 TO 30TH SEPTEMBER, 2021</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources.</p> <p>At the invitation of the Chair, the Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report which provided a summary of the Treasury Management activity undertaken between 1st April and 30th September, 2021 in</p>	

accordance with the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice. The Chief Officer continued by highlighting the following salient points:

- The forecast bank rates had been updated since the report had been scrutinised to reflect the impact of the unexpected Bank of England bank rate change which had increased by 0.25% in December 2021. This increase had previously been expected in the second quarter of 2022. The table in the appendix of the report had been updated to reflect this change in order to provide Members with the most up to date information that was available.
- A summary of the activities was detailed in the table at paragraph 5.1.6 of the report and despite the financial climate in relation to the pandemic, the authority had performed well in the first half of the year with regard to its treasury management activities, with investment returns of £13,000 being achieved during that period with an average interest rate of 0.02% which, was above the benchmark rate of -0.8%. However, this reflected the impact the pandemic was having on bank base rates and in turn the market interest rates offered on investments.
- The annual budgeted investment interest was £6,000 which had been exceeded in part due to the investment in relation to the railway infrastructure monies.
- An average interest rate 0.31% had been paid on temporary borrowings during the year against a benchmark rate of 1.7% which had resulted in £49,000 being paid in interest payments for the 6-month period against a £425,000 full year budget. It was noted that the interest payable for the full year was well in budget and the interest payable by the authority had been minimised as far as possible and this was evidence of good performance.
- All the treasury management limits and prudential indicators had been complied with during the year and no institutions in which investments had been made during the period had had any difficulties in repaying its interest. Therefore, the authority had not been exposed to any financial loss as result of the difficult economic climate.

- The Chief Officer concluded by advising that other financial investment opportunities would continue to be monitored during the remaining part of the financial year and would be reported to Members at the end of the current financial year.

Members were then given the opportunity to raise questions/comment on the report.

The Leader of the Labour Group referred to paragraph 5.2.2 of the report and in particular, the £70m rail loan and sought reassurance and asked whether the Chief Officer Resources was confident that other investment opportunities would become available.

The Chief Officer Resources commenced by stating that she was confident that other investment opportunities would become available. The Chief Officer advised that over the last year additional opportunities had already been identified alongside the authority's traditional investment opportunities and alternative investment arrangements made. The Chief Officer concluded by reiterating that she was convinced that further opportunities would be identified moving forward.

In reply to a question, the Chief Officer confirmed that the rail loan had been categorised as long term borrowing.

A Member advised that the service to Crosskeys had commenced on 13th December, 2021 and enquired when the Council would be likely to receive the first tranche of income from Crosskeys and other stations along the route, which would help towards the loan repayment.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that as part of the Quadripartite Agreement, the Council would be guaranteed an income stream to repay the loan to Welsh Government over the 50-year period of the loan and the agreement stipulated that the loan repayments did not have to commence until the income had been received by the Council. However, in terms of the timings when the income was expected to be received, the Chief Officer undertook to pursue the matter and report back accordingly.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the treasury management activity undertaken during the 2021/22 financial year be noted and the record of performance and compliance achieved during the first half of the 2021/22 financial year be accepted.

22. CARDIFF CAPITAL REGION CITY DEAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW 2020/21 QUARTER 2

Members considered the report of the Managing Director.

The Managing Director commenced by stating that this was a regular report which detailed the progress and activities delivered by the Cardiff Capital Region. It was noted that Blaenau Gwent was part of the South East Region partnership and the report specifically provided an update on the projects being delivered in the County Borough, which were being progressed as part of the partnership. These key projects included Metro Plus, promoting and introducing ULE vehicles (particularly taxis), housing scheme in Ashvale, Tredegar and recognising the success of the Aspire Apprenticeship Programme a regional pilot was planned with the aim of rolling the programme out across the region.

These projects resulted in just over £2m investment in the County Borough at present. It was noted that the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee considered and supported the report in December 2021.

The Managing Director, thereupon, concluded by provided an update in relation to the development of the Regional Corporate Joint Committees (CJC's) and advised that government legislation now required the four regions in Wales to establish a CJC in 2022. The inaugural meetings of the CJC's were currently taking place and the inaugural meeting of the South East Wales CJC would take place the following week to set the budget (by 31st January, 2022) for the forthcoming year. The new committee powers for these Committees would come into effect in June 2022.

Members were then given the opportunity to raise questions and comment on the report at this juncture.

Metro Plus Scheme – Abertillery Spur - the Leader of the Labour Group referred to paragraphs 2.4 to 2.6 of the report which related

to the Abertillery Spur of the Metro Plus Scheme and expressed his concern that whilst there had been on-going discussions about this project for some time, no definitive conclusion had been reached with regard to the funding for this venture. He stated in his opinion if the scheme did not come to fruition then perhaps the monies should be invested elsewhere. The Leader of the Labour Group requested an update in respect of this project and the discussions that had taken place to date.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services advised that discussions were on-going with U.K. Government. It was noted that U.K. Government had announced the previous year a programme called 'Restoring Your Railways – RYR' and had sought bids across the U.K. as part of the 'Levelling Up' agenda for railways to be developed in various stages. As part of that programme the Welsh Government had submitted a number of schemes, the Abertillery Spur being one such scheme. On-going dialogue was taking place between U.K. and Welsh Governments regarding the scheme and an announcement in respect of the RYR Programme from U.K. Government was awaited – this would give an indication of where the scheme was in terms of funding priorities. It was noted that the Abertillery Spur scheme was interrelated with the project work that was progressing on the main Ebbw Valley Railway.

The Leader of the Labour Group said that there was some doubt about the scheme and in his opinion, felt that the project was dwindling. He asked whether it would be a fair to definitively state that the scheme was not anywhere nearer in receiving funding than 5 years ago.

The Corporate Director advised that for the first time dialogue for potential funding sources for the scheme had been taking place and the GRIP 3 development and design work on the Abertillery line funded by Cardiff Capital Region was being progressed by Transport for Wales. U.K. and Welsh Governments were discussing the scope of the project and nature of work. The scheme was further forward in terms of the development process and the £70m rail project had opened up the opportunity to realise the Abertillery service. It was noted that whilst the project was moving forward, rail projects were slow to progress and complex because there were a number of organisations involved in the scheme and this interface introduced complications in terms of timelines.

The Leader of the Labour Group pointed out that the U.K and Welsh Government's also had competing financial priorities and in his view negotiation was still required with Welsh and U.K. Government in terms of achieving funding for the project and the authority was not much closer to the scheme coming to fruition. He added that the partnership with the Cardiff Capital Region was an opportunity for Blaenau Gwent but pointed out that if progress was not being made the authority needed to scope out another project to be progressed elsewhere in the County Borough.

In reply to a question regarding activity that was taking place adjacent to Cwrt Brachty, Aberbeeg the Corporate Director assumed that this activity related to the GRIP 3 design work which was being undertaken to the mainline and the interface between the mainline and Abertillery spur in order to inform the design plans and costings.

Last Train Service on a Saturday – a Member expressed his concern that the last train service from Cardiff on a Saturday was being cancelled at short notice and an alternative bus service was not being provided. He requested that officers investigate and correspond with Transport for Wales regarding this matter.

E3 Bus Service – a Member advised that the Leader had previously spoken about the priority of Metro and the importance of cross valley transportation links. He asked the Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development when he had become aware and had he been consulted that the E3 bus service between Aberbeeg and Cwm was being discontinued. This had left Cwm with the worst bus service in the County Borough and left constituents in a position who wanted to travel 2 miles to Cwm having to make a 55-minute journey. He explained that elderly people who needed to attend the hospital had to walk from Aberbeeg to Commercial Road, followed by a 55-minute bus journey (via a change at Ebbw Vale). The Member expressed his concern that this was wholly unacceptable and requested the Executive Member meet with the public of Cwm and Aberbeeg and make representations to Welsh Government regarding the regulation of the buses.

The Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development said that discussions had taken place with an operator to ascertain if some of the routes could be renegotiated but dialogue

needed to take place other service providers across the County Borough. He welcomed the approach regarding meeting with Welsh Government and offered the Member to be involved in those discussions.

The Member said that an integrated transport system was required and he would be happy to attend a joint meeting with the Executive Member at Welsh Government. He requested that in the meantime, emergency provision be made for residents of Aberbeeg and said that this could be funded from reserves.

A Ward Member for Cwm said that he had in excess of 47 years' experience of working for a bus service and the area of Cwm had been cut off. He advised that he would also like to be involved in the discussions going forward.

In reply to a concern raised by a Member regarding the Chair not allowing certain lines of questioning, he advised that this was the only opportunity he had to scrutinise this report because he was not a Member of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee and asked for a legal opinion on the matter.

The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance said that a Member had the right to ask questions at Council but this would depend on the nature of the question and if directly related to the report and this would vary according to the circumstances of what was being asked. The Chair always had the right to permit or not permit a question and the Chair's remit as outlined in the Constitution was to regulate debate, with support. The officer suggested that it may be beneficial for a discussion be held outside of the meeting regarding these parameters.

The Leader of the Labour Group said that a discussion would be useful and said as far as he was concerned every question that had been asked on the agenda had related to items contained within the reports.

Electric Taxi Vehicle Trial – the Head of Regeneration confirmed that taxi drivers were able to rent electric vehicles since the beginning of the year. There were some challenges as drivers were now having to learn how to drive electric vehicles as opposed to petrol or diesel vehicles. In addition, there were a number of charging points that needed to be connected to power sources for

taxis to recharge and this was currently being pursued with the utility company to prioritise.

Cross Valley Transportation Links – a Member enquired what work was actually in progress to link the valleys of Tredegar and Brynmawr and the progress made to link these valleys with stations and outlying industrial estates.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services advised that currently Tredegar had links to Rhymney as well as Ebbw Vale stations. However, with the main rail network being upgraded there was a need for a piece of work to be undertaken by the new Council to develop a transport plan. This work would need to include how the increased frequency of rail services was used and interlinked with local services. It was noted that the authority was not the transport authority so did not have the remit for the bus routes but in conjunction with the Regional Transport Authority, a regional transport plan could be developed to include how the Metro investments across the region could link in with public transport.

The Corporate Director continued by advising that a 'flecsi' bus service was currently being piloted which included services to industrial estates and people working at Rassau Industrial Estate could now travel to this site using this bus service to meet their shift patterns - this had received positive feedback from the businesses. This pilot would inform future decisions and the regional work would inform discussions but he reiterated that the Council was not the transport authority and work was required to be undertaken across multiple organisations to develop a future transport plan for the authority.

The Member continued by referring to electric taxis and pointed out that valley towns were very different to cities and other areas and the costs were prohibitive for taxi drivers. He asked whether the authority was working on any system to help drivers switch to electric vehicles in the future.

The Head of Regeneration said that a number of valley areas had already raised this concern and Cardiff Capital Region was investigating financing to make it much easier for taxi drivers to afford electric vehicles in the future. The outcome of this investigation was awaited.

The Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development said that further work was required in conjunction with the Regional Transport Authority. Whilst progress had been made including services to some industrial estates this needed to be extended as quickly as possible and this was recognised by Transport for Wales. However, investment was key to reach the next level and buses played a key role moving forward.

The Member who commented earlier said that this was disappointing and had raised this point in scrutiny on multiple occasions.

The Leader of the Labour Group concluded by stating that because the funding for the Abertillery Spur was no closer to being received this may be the opportunity for the Council to reconsider the projects and priorities submitted to the Cardiff Capital Region as part of the programme.

It was unanimously,

RESOLVED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted.

23. MEMBERSHIPS REPORT

Consideration was given to:

(a) Aneurin Bevan Community Health Council

- appointing two representatives to the above.

No nominations for these positions were received.

(b) Advisory Panel for Local Authority Governors

The following recommendations were made by the Panel on 25th January, 2022 to appoint:

Georgetown Primary School – Donna Hardman

**Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg and Brynmawr Foundation Schools
– Councillor John Hill**

	<p>Abertillery Learning Community – Councillor Nigel Daniels</p> <p>Abertillery Learning Community – Deborah Mary Field</p> <p>Ysgol Gyfun Tredegar Comprehensive School – Peter Harriman</p> <p>St. Joseph’s Primary School – Councillor Malcolm Cross.</p> <p>Coed-y-Garn Primary School – Rafi Abbas (approved at the last Panel on 15/11/2021)</p> <p>Rhos-y-Fedwen Primary School – Councillor Gareth A. Davies</p> <p>It was noted that Councillor David Wilkshire’s term of office on Rhos-y-Fedwen Primary School had been extended for an additional 6 months.</p> <p>It was, thereupon unanimously,</p> <p>RESOLVED that the above appointments be endorsed.</p>	
24.	<p><u>EXEMPT ITEM</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 exemption were available on a schedule maintained by the proper officer).</p>	
25.	<p><u>WASTE TRANSFER STATION AND HOUSEHOLD WASTE RECYCLING CENTRE</u></p> <p>It was noted that this item had been <u>deferred</u> and would be considered at a Special Meeting of the Council on 7th February, 2022.</p>	

26. APPLICATION TO LEASE LAND AT BEDWELLTY PARK

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.

The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services spoke briefly to the report and it was unanimously,

RESOLVED that the report which related to the financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the authority) be accepted and Option 1 be agreed, namely that:

The Council as Charitable Trustees were satisfied, that the terms on which the disposition was proposed to be made were the best that could reasonably be obtained for the charity and agreed to enter into a lease of the area of land shown edged red on the plan attached to Appendix 1 for a term of three years or until such time as the development of the new Tredegar HWBC had concluded subject to:

- The organisation named in the report paying a yearly rental of £900.00 per annum.
- Any revenue receipt being ring fenced for use by the Charity in furtherance of the objects of the Charity and not pooled for use within the Council's General Fund.