

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

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

**SUBJECT:**        **SPECIAL CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE – 19<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2019**

**REPORT OF:**       **DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT OFFICER**

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

Councillors: G. Paulsen  
                  P. Baldwin  
                  M. Cook  
                  M. Cross  
                  P. Edwards  
                  J. Hill  
                  C. Meredith  
                  M. Moore  
                  L. Parsons  
                  J. Wilkins

**Leader of the Council / Executive Member for  
Corporate Services**  
Councillor N. Daniels

**AND:**            Chief Officer – Commercial  
                  Chief Officer - Resources  
                  Head of Organisational Development  
                  Head of Governance & Partnerships  
                  Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

**ALSO:**           Dave Rees – Branch Chair - Unison

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

No. 2	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H. McCarthy and D. Wilkshire.</p>	
No. 3	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>Councillor Phil Edwards declared an interest in Item 10 - Bridging The Gap – Income Recovery Strategic Business Review.</p>	
No. 4	<p><b><u>CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET – 4<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2019</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Forward Work Programme - CCTV</u></b></p> <p>In response to a Members question in relation to a progress update regarding CCTV, the Head of Governance and Partnerships said that a joint position statement with colleagues could be provided to the December meeting. The number of police requests to view evidence which lead to prosecutions would be provided as part of the report to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny in January 2020.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
No. 6	<p><b><u>SPECIAL CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Special Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 26th September, 2019 were submitted.</p>	

	The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.	
<b>No. 7</b>	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET – 26TH SEPTEMBER, 2019</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 26th September, 2019 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Health &amp; Safety Annual Report</u></b></p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding the timescale for a more detailed breakdown of accidents/incidents e.g. violence and aggression against staff, the Head of Organisational Development said that a further breakdown of the data on violence and aggression towards staff in the Council and schools for 2018/19 would be provided to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny in January 2020.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<b>No. 8</b>	<p><b><u>EXECUTIVE DECISION SHEET FOR THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the Executive Decision Sheet.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Executive Decision Sheet be noted.</p>	
<b>No. 9</b>	<p><b><u>BRIDGING THE GAP – FEES AND CHARGES STRATEGIC BUSINESS REVIEW</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial which was presented to update Members on the Strategic Business Review on Fees and Charges.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Commercial spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member referred to bulky waste items and raised concerns around the health and safety aspect of items being left on pavements and roadsides for long periods before collection. The Chair advised that this item be referred to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee.</p>	

	<p>A Member commented that she welcomed the full cost recovery model and calculator which could provide an alignment of fees and charges.</p> <p>In response to a Member's enquiry regarding the 700 lines of fees and charges, the Chief Officer Commercial said that a phased approach would be used to review and apply the full cost recovery calculator. She was working with Budget Holders and Finance Business Partners regarding market testing and the identified figures would show where there was an opportunity to do full cost recovery.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee considered and scrutinised the proposed approach and appendix 1.</p>	
<b>No. 10</b>	<p><b><u>BRIDGING THE GAP – INCOME RECOVERY STRATEGIC BUSINESS REVIEW</u></b></p> <p>Councillor Phil Edwards declared an interest in this item and remained and took part in discussion at the meeting.</p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to scrutinise the work undertaken as part of the Income Recovery Strategic Business Review.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>In response to a Member's enquiry regarding prompt payment of invoices and how invoices were sent, the Chief Officer Resources said that currently no early payment discount was offered and the majority of invoices were sent through the post, occasionally some were sent electronically. With regard to removal of bulky waste, payment was made in advance to avoid issuing invoices and the Council were looking to offer more services in this way where appropriate.</p> <p>A Member commented on the good work of the Credit Union to support residents and requested that the Credit Union be invited to present at a Member Briefing Session. The Chair</p>	

	<p>advised that a Members Briefing Session would be arranged in the new year.</p> <p>A Member commented on collaboration work with the Citizen's Advice Bureau and the increased number of residents seeking advice around money management and debt and raised concerns if proposed cuts were to be implemented in future.</p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding supporting and engaging with individuals, the Chief Officer Resources said that a pilot scheme was to be implemented within the Flying Start Hub in Cefn Golau to identify and test the most suitable method of engagement and develop appropriate ways in which the Council could support them.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2, namely that Committee scrutinised and provided specific comment on the findings and the proposed actions prior to recommending to Council.</p>	
<b>No. 11</b>	<p><b><u>BRIDGING THE GAP – THIRD PARTY EXPENDITURE STRATEGIC BUSINESS REVIEW</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial which was presented to update Members on the Strategic Business Review on Third Party Expenditure.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Commercial spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>In response to a Member's enquiry, the Chief Officer Commercial said that a baseline had been established in July to September. The Strategic Business Review on Third Party Expenditure would streamline the systems used to monitor and manage contractual arrangements with suppliers and the overall impact of the expenditure would be monitored through the Bridging the Gap programme.</p> <p>A Member enquired regarding discount for prompt payments. The Chief Officer Commercial said that with approximately 7,000 suppliers it was important that prompt payment was made as a portion of that money would go back into the local economy.</p>	

	<p>In response to a Member's question regarding procurement of the annual insurance premium, the Chief Officer Commercial said that the Council would always seek value for money. There were guidance rules and regulations to follow when procuring services, however, it was not always about price there were other considerations such as quality, social value and other responsibilities with spending the public pound. An analysis of the data could identify the Council's investment in the local economy.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1, namely that Members accept the report on the Strategic Business Review on Third Party Expenditure and appendix 1 and recommend to Council for approval.</p>	
<b>No. 12</b>	<p><b><u>BRIDGING THE GAP – WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIC BUSINESS REVIEW</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Commercial which was presented to update Members on the Strategic Business Review on Workplace Transformation.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Commercial spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>In response to a Member's enquiry regarding the most up to date operating programme, the Chief Officer Commercial explained that licenses had to be purchased to run operating systems and current licences would no longer be supported in 2021. The operating system was being upgraded to Windows 10 and Office 2016 as preparation for deploying Office 365.</p> <p>A Member enquired regarding the asset register. The Chief Officer Commercial said that a critical part of the review process was to have a full asset register to control the IT estate more effectively going forward.</p> <p>A Member enquired if surplus laptops could be donated to charities. The Chief Officer Commercial said that some laptops would be at the end of life and others would be used for repairs to existing laptops. If at the end of the process</p>	

	<p>there were surplus laptops the Officer could explore this option.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Committee considered and scrutinised the proposed approach and appendix 1.</p> <p>Councillor Martin Cook left the meeting at this juncture.</p>	
No. 13	<p><b><u>COUNCIL TAX – REMOVAL OF EMPTY PROPERTY DISCOUNT ALLOWANCE FOR PRESCRIBED CLASS C DWELLINGS</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to provide details of the current policy with regard to the Council Tax discounts.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member enquired if a levy could be imposed once a long term empty property had been sold. The Chief Officer Resources said that this proposal could be explored but the focus was to get properties back into habitable use. Grants were currently available to bring properties back to a habitable level.</p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding collection rates, the Chief Officer Resources said that collection rates were approximately 95%.</p> <p>A Member enquired if prior notification would need to be given. The Chief Officer Resources said that if Committee agreed the proposal, engagement with landlords and owners/occupiers would need to be undertaken before 2020.</p> <p>The Chief Officer commented that the Welsh Government was changing the funding formula and would no longer take into account the discounts for Class C properties. The Council could see a reduction in funding of approximately £480,000.</p>	

	<p>The Chair noted paragraph 6.3 which referred to the many positive results in encouraging empty homes back into use.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Scrutiny Committee considered and recommend that Council approve to set the current discount for Class A, B &amp; C dwellings at 0% with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.</p>	
<b>No. 14</b>	<p><b><u>SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development which was presented to provide Members with the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge sickness absence performance 2018/19 and the proposed actions for improvement.</p> <p>The Head of Organisational Development spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>The Chair invited the Branch Chair – Unison to address the Committee.</p> <p>The Branch Chair commented that as a result of the 9 year austerity measures local authorities had received lower settlements from the Welsh Government which meant that Councils had to do more with less and as a result staff workloads had increased considerably. He pointed out that 95% of staff took no sick leave and it would be unfair to allow the minority of staff to bring down the Authority's reputation with the public and press.</p> <p>The Sickness Absence Policy was fit for purpose, however, Managers needed to use it more effectively. If sickness absence figures were high in a particular area Managers needed to understand the reasons behind those figures and address issues promptly in their one to one sessions with staff. Those staff who prioritised and remained in work needed to be appreciated.</p> <p>Unison had invested in mental health by paying for courses for staff to attend and had been working tirelessly with Organisational Development and the Chief Officer Commercial to identify areas where sickness absence was high. He pointed out that the Authority had an ageing</p>	



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workforce with some front line staff having physical roles such as lifting people. He stressed that a strategy needed to be developed if staff were expected to work up to 67 years of age, although he was mindful of the overall picture as Blaenau Gwent was a small authority.

The Chair enquired regarding electronic HR/Payroll system iTrent. The Head of Organisational Development said that managerial self-service was rolled out in April 2018 and the electronic system and the manual sickness absence recording system were run in parallel for a period of time to support managers. A sickness absence dashboard had been developed and would be operational before the new year which would allow enhanced analysis of sickness trends.

In response to the Chair's question regarding quarterly reviews of sickness absence, the Head of Organisational Development explained that managerial information was developed monthly and that there would be detailed discussions at Directorate Management Teams on a quarterly basis.

The Branch Chair commented that the Counselling Service had been decommissioned due to budget savings and wanted to look at ways to resume this service possibly through Occupational Health as Counselling was a valuable and beneficial service for staff regarding well-being issues etc. The Head of Organisational Development said that plans were in place to review the Occupational Health contract and would look at the opportunity as part of that arrangement.

A Member referred to the Managerial actions arising from the Corporate Leadership Team Engagement and commented on the effectiveness of managers and felt that managers not following the managerial actions should be taken to task. Another Member felt that the system was robust and monthly meetings with second line managers should be held to support Managers in the first instance.

A Member again referred to training on the iTrent system. The Head of Organisational Development said that a whole raft of iTrent training had been completed in 2018 and again in 2019. Refresher training for managers would be rolled

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	<p>out in early 2019 with an emphasis on pushing ownership of sickness absence to the individual.</p> <p>A Member referred to bullet point 7 of the 2018/19 Top Trigger Case review 'lack of evidence that sickness absence documentation being completed' and enquired if sickness levels had increased due to better recording. The Head of Organisational Development agreed that this could be a contributory factor, however, there were a number of reasons for increased sickness absence figures such as peaks at the time of service change programmes.</p> <p>The Chair invited to the Leader of the Council/Executive Member for Corporate Services to address the Committee.</p> <p>The Leader of the Council/Executive Member for Corporate Services commented that this report be debated at the Executive Committee and high levels of sickness absence was a serious issue for the Authority, he mirrored the Branch Chair's comments and supported the Member's view that line Manager's needed support from senior Manager's to address potential issues. In relation to absence monitoring, from January 2020 each Scrutiny Committee would have individual sickness review reporting as part of their Forward Work Programme for consideration. He undertook to relay the views of the Scrutiny Committee back to the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the Scrutiny Committee endorse the report and proposed arrangements to support the improvement in attendance.</p>	
<b>No. 15</b>	<p><b><u>TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW REPORT – 1<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2019 TO 30<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2019</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chief Officer Resources which was presented to give Members the opportunity to scrutinise the Treasury Management activities carried out by the Authority during the first half of the 2019/20 financial year.</p> <p>The Chief Officer Resources spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein which</p>	

	<p>included that the Authority had performed well in terms of Treasury Management.</p> <p>A Member enquired regarding fixed term loans. The Chief Officer Resources responded that the Authority had a mixture of fixed, temporary, long and short term loans.</p> <p>A Member referred to the policy of not investing in fossil fuels. The Chief Officer Resources explained that the Authority did not have a specific policy regarding this, however, the Authority was part of Torfaen Pension Scheme and they had begun to change their policy due to environment and climate change issues.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that Members scrutinised the activity undertaken during the first half of the 2019/20 financial year and do not consider any amendments to the Treasury Strategy moving forward prior to its submission to full Council.</p>	
<b>No. 16</b>	<p><b><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 5<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER, 2019</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>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 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 be approved.</p>	