

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

SUBJECT: CORPORATE OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16TH APRIL, 2021

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S. HEALY (CHAIR)

Councillors M. Cook

P. Baldwin

J.C. Morgan (sub for Cllr M. Cross)

G.A. Davies

L. Elias

W. Hodgins (sub for Cllr J. Hill)

J. Holt

H. McCarthy

C. Meredith

B. Summers (sub for Cllr J.P. Morgan)

G. Paulsen

T. Smith

S. Thomas

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services
Interim Chief Officer Commercial
Chief Officer Resources
Head of Organisational Development
Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change
Press & Publicity Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

WITH: Mr. D. Rees, Unison

| <u>ITEM</u> | <u>SUBJECT</u> | <u>ACTION</u> |
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| 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>An apology for absence was received from Councillor G. Collier.</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>Consideration was given to the Minutes of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 5th March, 2021.</p> <p>A Member advised that he had not received a response to the request he made at the last meeting. The Member was disappointed that the Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services had not responded to his request and felt that it was unacceptable.</p> <p>The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services apologised to the Member and advised that he would contact him direct at a mutually convenient time as it was information outside of the report presented at the last meeting.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p> | |

No. 5

ACTION SHEET – 5TH MARCH, 2021

The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee held on 5th March, 2021 was submitted; whereupon:-

CCTV

A Member asked when the report to review the equality of provision of CCTV could be expected. The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that data would be gathered over a period of time and needed to include intelligence gained from meetings with Members. These findings would then be presented as part of the annual monitoring report.

The Member felt that these issues needed to be addressed sooner rather than later as communities needs continually change.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that a period of monitoring before a progress/update report could be presented.

The Member reiterated that Nantyglo Ward had no cameras and therefore he felt it was important to this Ward that updates are more regular than annually.

Another Member concurred with the concerns raised and advised that Members wanted to see progress. The Member added that other local authorities in Gwent had direct links to the Cloud and therefore Police had footage as it happened and this was what was required by residents and Members. It would demonstrate the Council working in partnership with the Police to assure our residents are safe.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that following further contact with the PCC their position remained unchanged there was no funding available. The Member noted the benefits of being linked to the Cloud, however if there were no cameras in certain locations then there would be no benefit to those areas. The Member looked forward to future reports to monitor progress of this matter.

The Committee AGREED that the action sheet be noted.

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| No. 6 | <p><u>CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY – QUARTERLY UPDATE</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Interim Chief Officer Commercial.</p> <p>The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that the report provided progress as at Quarter 4 against the Corporate Communications Strategy. The Interim Chief Officer spoke to the report and advised that the pandemic had resulted in the delivery of the strategy being entirely focused on the communication related to Covid-19. The importance of digital and social media became even more significant during the pandemic to ensure our communities were kept informed.</p> <p>It was noted that the Corporate Communications Team was a key member of the Gwent Local Resilience Forum Warning and Informing Group. The Group was responsible for aligning communications and communicating key information to the residents of Gwent during the pandemic. The Interim Chief Officer Commercial noted the importance of the Team ensuring a consistent approach between local partners, PHW and Welsh Government. The continually changing nature of the Pandemic had required a constant flow of information and which needed to be clear and effective as well as coordinated between all sectors.</p> <p>The Interim Chief Officer Commercial further outlined the aims of the Communication Plan in respect of the Covid-19 response as detailed in the report.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee considered the Quarter 4 (January to March 2021) update against the Communication Strategy prior to it being presented to the Executive Committee.</p> | |
| No. 7 | <p><u>COMMERCIAL STRATEGY QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE MONITORING</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Interim Chief Officer Commercial.</p> | |

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial spoke to the report which outlined Quarter 4 of the Commercial Strategy. The Interim Chief Officer advised that the Council's commercial activities were driven by the ambitions as detailed in the Strategy. The pandemic continued to have an impact on the delivery of the Strategy, however substantial progress had been made in Quarter 4 and referred Members to the key activity which was summarised in the report in line with the Council's key themes and ambitions.

The following questions were raised at this juncture and responded to accordingly:-

Strategic Commissioning and Commercial Board – it was confirmed that the Board was made up of the Corporate Leadership Team, Legal, Resources and Procurement officers.

Welsh Government Digital Democracy Fund – it was informed that the fund was in relation to user research with 16 to 25 year olds to gain an understanding of how young people access the democracy and obtain feedback on their experiences.

Contact Centre – concerns were raised around the Contact Centre, particularly 'Out of Hours Service' being sourced outside of Blaenau Gwent as it was important that operators knew the local area. It was also asked that if there are any changes that Elected Members be informed.

An Officer confirmed that a local based service provision would be pursued. The Officer further advised that a number of actions were being taken forward with SRS to address issues raised.

Closure of the Civic Centre – concerns were raised around the services offered at the Civic Centre via the Receptionist and asked if these services, such as Blue Badge applications would be available at the Community Hubs.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that all these aspects of the services available at the Civic Centre are being looked at in order to understand the needs of the customer. The data would be collected and communicated to Members to ensure they are informed accordingly.

Bilingual Contact Centre Message – it was advised that residents had raised concerns with Members that Welsh was first for the Contact Centre greeting. It was a long message and in some cases costly to the resident. A Member asked if the English could be first, which was practice in some other local authorities.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial reminded Members that the Council had an obligation to the Welsh Language Act and advised that this request could be investigated, however it was important that the Council operated within their responsibilities to the Act.

Calls Times to the Contact Centre – in response to concerns raised in relation to the cost of the sometimes lengthy wait times to the Contact Centre, the Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that waiting times are monitored as part of the service performance arrangements and improvements such as a que system would be developed.

Officers Mobile Numbers – due to agile working arrangements it was pointed out that some officers were hardly in the office and had been provided with mobile phones. A Member asked if these mobile phone numbers could be issued to Members as it was important they remain accessible to Members.

The Interim Chief Officer Commercial advised that office numbers should be re-directed to officers mobile phones.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely the Quarter 4 progress update against the Commercial Strategy was considered prior to the report being presented to Executive Committee.

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| No. 8 | <p data-bbox="352 197 1046 232"><u>TEST TRACE AND PROTECT SERVICE</u></p> <p data-bbox="352 282 1334 405">Consideration was given to the report of the Interim Chief Officer Commercial and the Service Manager Customer Experience and Transformation.</p> <p data-bbox="352 454 1334 707">The Interim Chief Officer Commercial provided an overview of the report and invited the Service Manager Customer Experience and Transformation to provide an update on the current position and performance of the service as detailed in the report. It was noted that performance of Gwent TTP service as a region was in the top quartile.</p> <p data-bbox="352 757 1334 1133">A Member advised that he had requested this report as he had been monitoring the report issued by Monmouthshire County Council who provided these details on a Ward by Ward basis. The Member appreciated the excellent work of the NHS and the Local Authority, however as an Elected Member he felt that this level of detail was needed for Blaenau Gwent. It was hoped that Covid-19 numbers would now continue to reduce and thanked the Officers for an informative report.</p> <p data-bbox="352 1182 1334 1305">The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely accepted the progress update.</p> | |
| No. 9 | <p data-bbox="352 1350 815 1386"><u>AGILE WORKING POLICY</u></p> <p data-bbox="352 1435 1334 1518">Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Organisational Development.</p> <p data-bbox="352 1568 1334 1865">The Head of Organisational Development presented the report which provided Members with the opportunity to scrutinise, challenge and make suggestions on the proposed Agile Working Policy for the Council's workforce further to the report that was approved at Council on the 25th March, 2021 on the New Council Operating Model & Working Arrangements</p> | |

The Officer advised that the introduction of a new model of agile working would bring modern working practices, enhance employees' working experience, maximise performance and productivity and realise financial gains. The Agile Working Policy being key to delivering the future working model and linked to the Council's vision for sustainable development including sustainable economic growth and decarbonisation.

The Head of Organisational Development further spoke to the report and noted the responsibilities as detailed in the Policy. The Officer noted that Unison, GMB and Unite trade unions had all been fully engaged in the development of the and the draft Agile Working Policy.

The Draft Policy had been sent to trade unions for formal consultation and two requests had been received from Unison for consideration, as follows:-

- Unison would like to see a £16 allowance for Agile workers not £12. The Corporate Leadership Team discussed this proposal and support a figure of £15.60 to recommend to Members for their consideration (pro rata figure which would be fair to all workers); and
- all current employees that are designated as home or agile workers be able to utilise an allowance of up to £200 to cover the cost of a chair and desk that would be able to fit in within the home environment. The allowance to be used with an approved council supplier. The Corporate Leadership Team support the choice for the workforce from approved suppliers/including recycled equipment. Unison also requested that any future workforce (new recruits) be given the option of the allowance if they are paid scale 6 or below.

The Head of Organisational Development referred Members to the options and noted the preferred option.

The Officer invited questions/comments from the Members at this juncture.

A Member asked that following approval of the New Working Arrangements which formulated this Policy had any members of staff left the Council sighting agile working as the reason.

The Member stated that he had made his point clear at the Council meeting and reiterated that he was totally against the new way of working at this time. The Member had many concerns which included employee's mental health. The last year during the pandemic had been horrendous which saw people confined to their homes. The Member wanted assurances from the Council that if an employee did not wish to work from home for a specific reason that this would be accommodated.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that as part of the Policy there were a number of documents to be completed with the employee and their manager as part of 1-2-1 consultation meetings to be undertaken. The individual's circumstances, their health and wellbeing and mental health would all be taken into account and if adjustments are to be made these would be put in place. The 1-2-1s would identify the individuals needs and agree an appropriate course of action or adjustment. Homeworking will not be forced on any member of the workforce.

The Head of Organisational Development said she was not aware that any members of staff had left the Authority because of plans for the New Council Operating Model.

The Member had hoped that all employees would be dealt with sympathetically.

The Member also noted the £15.60 put forward by the Corporate Leadership Team and proposed that the figure be rounded up to £16.00 in conjunction with the Trade Unions proposal.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Trade Union representative addressed the Committee. The representative welcomed the opportunity to attend the meeting to ensure that any misinformation could be clarified for Members. The Trade Union representative advised that staff and Elected Members had stepped up to the way in which the pandemic had seen the Council work from home and adjust to new technology in the past year.

The Trade Union representative advised that the option for home working had been raised by unions at the WLGA and at the Workforce Partnership for Wales. The work undertaken with the Council had been first class and the Council was now at an important stage in the process. It was added that as part of that work by the trade unions, a survey of 1000 people from across Wales was undertaken and this would be shared with staff shortly. The thinking and negotiating of the trade unions had been captured in the policy and advised that the £16.00 costs had been rounded up from the £15.60 put forward by CLT, however, the Trade Union representative confirmed that the £15.60 was in line with HMRC and based on the 3 days pro rata, therefore, the £15.60 was acceptable.

The Trade Union representative noted the comments raised by the Members and stated that no one would be forced to work from home. There could be a number of reasons for this in relation to mental health issues, the health and safety of the employee or an issue in terms of confidentiality within their home environment. Therefore, it was reiterated that no one would be forced to work from home and these assurances had been given by the Council.

With regard to 'office' furniture, the Trade Union representative appreciated that it would be beneficial to repurpose the office furniture currently used, however, we needed to be mindful that this furniture would be in employees' homes. There are some instances where that particular furniture may not fit the décor of the employee homes or be suitable for their home space, therefore on these occasions employees would be allowed to purchase their own furniture. The trade unions also felt it was important to provide an allowance to staff on a Scale 6 and new recruits who are lower paid to ensure our lowest paid workers are supported.

The Trade Union representative also suggested that consideration be given to mileage policy and it was put forward that mileage be claimed from the boundary of Blaenau Gwent and not their homes which would be a financial saving to the Council.

The Unison Representative informed that Blaenau Gwent was the first local authority in Wales to deliver on this Agile Working Policy and it was paramount that in order for it to be successful our staff needed to be supported. During the last year staff had to endure many hardships and needed to make decisions whether to feed their children or put on the heating, unfortunately these were the sacrifices of the cost of living for our lower paid staff. This was another reason for 1-2-1s with employees as any concerns would be addressed and the Trade Union representative reiterated that employees would be given a choice. There were employees who wanted to work from home as well as employees who do not want to work at home and both these options could be supported.

The Trade Union representative said that the Union supported the report progressing to Council. The staff had been working over a year with this uncertainty and it was important that such assurances are now given to staff.

The Chair invited questions/observations from Members at this juncture.

In response to concerns raised around the monies to be paid to staff as well as monies which could be claimed via the HMRC. The Chief Officer Resources advised that the budget implication was due to the payment the Council had proposed of £26.00 per month or £15.60 per month dependant whether staff were permanent home workers or agile respectively. If workers were in receipt of these allowances from the Council, then no claims can be made for tax relief from HMRC.

The Chief Officer Resources added that the Council would be responsible for the costs to be paid to staff.

It was further asked if employees needed to create office space in their homes would the Authority be in position to provide staff with a loan to undertake these adjustments, to allow, if needed, that additional space and/or confidentiality.

The Chief Officer Resources advised that this assistance had been considered, however the Council was not in position to offer significant loans to staff for changes to their properties or to purchase summer houses.

The Trade Union representative added that work across other authorities in Wales was currently being held up as not all local authorities wanted to provide an agile working allowance. It was felt that staff were saving on travelling expenses, therefore such payments are outweighed. It was felt that Blaenau Gwent Council was adjusting as an employer of choice and through the pandemic the Authority had realised that there was benefits from home working for our staff. The Unison Representative felt that the new working arrangements would be beneficial to the staff.

Further concerns were raised around home working and it was reiterated that staff would not be forced to work from home.

In terms of accommodating staff, it was confirmed that the Council was confident that staff who did not want to work from home could be accommodated in existing buildings.

A Member referred to Monmouthshire County Council who had proposed hybrid working arrangements and the Head of Organisational Development confirmed a hybrid worker was the same as an agile worker, working between home and office buildings.

Another Member welcomed the report and the joint working between the Council and trade unions to achieve these negotiations for the benefit of staff. The Member felt that the agile working arrangements was good news for the Authority and was satisfied that the Council's staff well-being had been considered. It was also excellent news that this Council was the first to achieve such a modern way of working.

A Member felt that there were areas missing from the Policy in relation to training and development of new employees, and possibly a period of time in the office before taking up position at home.

Also, the Member raised concerns around the recruitment of new staff, as an agile worker the person could reside anywhere and work from home. The Council was the largest employer in Blaenau Gwent and therefore it was important that local jobs be retained locally. A mileage stipulation for officers on a particular grade should also be considered for future applicants. It was proposed that there be a social clause applied to contracts that recruitment was made within about 30 miles of the Borough.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that there would be an engagement plan which included training and development programme which would run alongside this policy for leaders and the workforce. The induction programme across the Council would need to be reviewed not just in conjunction with the policy but also in line with the digital opportunities now available.

In terms of recruitment, it was reported that the majority of Council staff were frontline and school based staff. The agile and permanent home workers were only a fraction of the workforce.

The Head of Organisational Development advised that the mileage policy would be reviewed once the Agile Working Policy had been approved by full Council.

The Trade Union representative added that the Council was aware of the importance of retaining jobs locally and noted that during recent recruitment for the Track, Trace and Protect roles individuals were applying from Birmingham. The Trade Union representative was pleased to confirm that Blaenau Gwent took on board the 'local jobs for local people' and the majority of employees were from the local areas.

In response to a question raised in relation to staff being asked to clear their desks at the Civic Centre, it was reported that this had not been a formal instruction as there was agreed protocols in place for staff who wished to enter the Civic Centre.

In response to a question raised in relation to trade union involvement, it was confirmed that all unions had been consulted and the Unison Representative had been invited to speak on behalf of the Joint Trade Unions.

A Member asked if staff had been consulted if they were not in a union. It confirmed that staff had been communicated via the MD Message, updates from managers and would be individually consulted in the 1-2-1 engagement with managers and staff.

The Chair thanked the Trade Unions for their involvement and cooperation as well as officers for producing an excellent report. The Chair also expressed thanks to Mr. D. Rees for his presentation and response to questions raised by Members.

A Member pointed out that the Committee was making a recommendation to Council, however this would not prohibit further questioning at Council. The Member concurred with the Officer that the Policy was a live document and stated that views could change. The Member supported Option 2 in this instance notwithstanding things could change following consideration at Council.

A Member seconded Option 2, although taking into account young people's future within this Borough, the Member requested that Organisational Development give consideration to an employee local social clause as part of the recruitment process.

RESOLVED accordingly.

It was further informed that £15.60 allowance was agreed following the explanation from the Unison Representative.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely the formal representations of the trade union was considered and amendments was suggested to the policy prior to presentation at Council.