



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee held on Tuesday 19th December 2023 at 5.00 pm.

This meeting was recorded, details of which can be accessed [here](#)

Chair present:

Mr C Jones (Chair)

Committee Members present:

Councillor M Maohoub Councillor S Rees
Councillor G Hopkins Councillor B Stephens
Mr J Roszkowski Mr M Jehu

Non-Committee Member present:

Councillor C Leyshon

Officers in attendance

Mr P Mee, Chief Executive
Mr B Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Group Director, Finance, Digital and Frontline Services
Mr A Wilkins, Director of Legal Services and Democratic Services
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Mr I Traylor, Service Director Pensions, Procurement & Transactional Services
Mr T Jones, Service Director – ICT & Digital Services
Ms L Lawson, Performance Manager
Ms S Davies, Service Director of Financial Services
Ms E Williams, Service Lead Enterprise Architecture
Mr M Davies, Operational Manager - Revenues and Corporate Fraud
Mr A Wathan, Head of Regional Audit Service
Ms L Cumpston, Group Audit Manager

33 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee and apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors L Tomkinson and A Ellis.

34 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

35 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee meeting held on 12th October 2023 as an accurate record.

36 **2022/23 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS - PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Service Director of Finance and Improvement Services provided the Governance and Audit Committee with an update on the status of the recommendations included within the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement.

The Service Director informed the Committee that all Local Authorities have a legal requirement to conduct a review, at least once per year, of the effectiveness of its system of internal control and must include a statement reporting on the review in the statement of accounts. It was explained that Rhondda Cynon Taf Council discharges this responsibility by producing an Annual Governance Statement.

The Service Director drew Members' attention to Appendix 1 of the report, which outlined 5 recommendations for the period, which would further support improvement to the Council's governance arrangements.

Members were informed that of the recommendations contained within Appendix 1, two had been implemented, one was on target, one had a revised completion date of March 2024 and one was ongoing. The Service Director fed back that the position statement demonstrated the progress being made to implement the recommendations reported within the Annual Governance Statement to further strengthen the current sound governance arrangements in place within the Local Authority.

Referring to the recommendation in respect of the Council's Participation Strategy and setting out how local people are encouraged to participate in decision-making by the Council, the Vice-Chair requested clarification. The Service Director advised that the Council had developed a Public Participation Strategy, which had been endorsed by Full Council and the document sets out the approach to ensure all voices and feedback is heard as part of decision making and future delivery of council services.

The Chair thanked the Service Director for the report and the Governance and Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To seek clarity and explanation where there are areas of concern; and
2. To form an opinion in respect of whether they are satisfied with the progress made to date to implement the recommendations.

37 **DRAFT ANNUAL SELF-ASSESSMENT 2022/23 (INCORPORATING THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT)**

The Council's Performance Manager presented the report, which provided the Committee with the opportunity to consider the Council's Self-Assessment for 2022/23 in advance of consideration by Council in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, which requires the Self-Assessment to be considered by Governance and Audit

Committee in advance of consideration by Council.

The Performance Manager stated that the Council has a strong track record of self-awareness and self-reflection processes and a culture of continuous improvement, irrespective of the various statutory requirements in place at any time. It was explained that there was no nationally prescribed model of annual self-assessment and therefore, the aim when undertaking the self-assessment was to continue to do so with minimal additional process or burden on the organisation and its managers. The intention was to make maximum use of the huge volume of information already in place across the Council, including reports, policies, strategies, plans and stakeholder feedback, which Elected Members would have had the opportunity to review and challenge, as part of the Council's existing governance arrangements.

It was explained that the 2022/23 Self-Assessment focused on the Council's progress in responding to the Improvement Themes emerging from the stock take in 2021/22 as well as consideration of the robustness of the management and monitoring arrangements in place as evidence the Council is delivering its priorities and be assured that:

- it is exercising its functions effectively;
- it is using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and
- its governance is effective for securing the above.

The officer drew Members' attention to section 5.3 of the report and explained that the Council's Self-Assessment had been integrated with the annual Corporate Performance Report and comprised of the following six sections:

1. The progress we have made against the nine themes for improvement which were identified in the 2021/2022 Self-Assessment;
2. How we have delivered on our Corporate Plan since 2020 as we prepare our new Plan from 2024;
3. How we have delivered the priorities of our Corporate Plan in 2022/23;
4. Assessment of our corporate functions;
5. The Self Evaluation (SSE) of our services; and
6. Well-being of Future Generations - Sustainable Development principle.

The Chief Executive thanked the Performance Manager for informing Members of the robust processes in place to comprise the self-assessment and took the opportunity to provide observations. The Chief Executive noted that the self-assessment was representative of a huge amount of data and evidence from across the Local Authority, which had been hyperlinked throughout the document. The document sought to demonstrate the range and diversity of the Council's functions and the scale of the services delivered, along with the progress on delivering the commitments throughout the year.

The Chief Executive referenced the nine themes identified in the Council's previous self-assessment and acknowledged the good progress made against those themes. Examples provided were in respect of the effective response to the significant and unprecedented financial challenges faced during the year; the progress made in delivering the ambitions of the Council's climate change strategy; and the ongoing capital investment in town centres. The Chief Executive was satisfied with the progress made across the nine themes but given the longevity of some, it was recognised that they would remain a priority going forward.

The Chief Executive was also satisfied that good progress had been made during the year following the challenge sessions held with the designated Directors.

The Chief Executive concluded that the document demonstrated the Council was well-run but not complacent, and is prepared to challenge and change the way of working when necessary. The Chief Executive was of the view that the Council had used its resources effectively and that within the Council, robust governance and performance management arrangements were in place.

One Member questioned if there were processes in place to acknowledge and learn from practices put in place during the previous self-assessment that did not work. The Chief Executive advised that the self-assessment informs delivery plans and priorities, which are monitored and reported quarterly to Members. Where there are exceptions or problems, it was noted that they were addressed and actioned accordingly. More generally, it was explained that progress against the nine themes previously identified were monitored and due to their medium to long term nature, are also included within this year's self-assessment. The Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services added that the quarterly Performance Report information provided to Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee includes evaluative activity as part of the three Corporate Plan priority action plans of People, Places and Prosperity to help assess the impact of the Council's work.

In relation to the Council's financial position and a key consideration of the self-assessment, which is whether the Council is using its resources effectively, one Member questioned how the Council is responding to the current financial pressure and how resilient it is. The Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services advised that an organisational-wide and on-going approach is in place to review the utilisation of resources, led by the Senior Leadership Team, with the process taking into account the level of services provided and impacts. It was noted that the process forward projects likely resource levels and costs into the medium term to inform service planning and delivery. Members were informed the arrangements have played a key part in ensuring the Council has consistently set and delivered balanced budgets over a number of years, with the Council also using reserves appropriately and sustainably as part of the arrangements. The Service Director added that the approach had also enabled the Council to identify and deliver significant budget savings on an on-going basis, and noted that the budget gap successfully addressed for the current financial year was £38Million. In terms of the Council's reserves, the Service Director assured the Committee that they were reviewed on a regular basis, with updates reported at least twice a year to Full Council to enable elected Members to scrutinise in detail and consider options to re-prioritise reserves to support additional investment into Corporate Plan priority areas.

In relation to workforce planning, one Member was disappointed to note the staff turnover in Community and Children Services, which had increased by 3%. It was noted that a Workforce Strategy was in place within Children's Services, and the Member was interested in the breakdown between the two services (i.e. Adult and Children's Services) and whether this was an area of ongoing review. The Chief Executive agreed that workforce planning was a key priority for the Council and explained that such challenges were faced across a wide range of service areas. In terms of the Workforce Strategy within Children's Services, the Chief Executive noted that it was successful in some respects as it modernised the approach to recruitment, sped up process and improved marketing

significantly, which had a positive impact in gaining interest in the posts. However, it was acknowledged that the Strategy had not, to date, been able to fully address the fundamental challenge of recruiting and retaining professional social workers in intensive intervention services. The Chief Executive explained the factors which were attributed to the challenge of recruitment and retention and stated that the environment was highly competitive across Wales with only approximately 60% of the posts filled. Members were informed that there were not enough individuals choosing to go into the profession and, therefore, work was being undertaken to provide incentives and to support more student placements to close the gap. The Chief Executive also spoke of the management of caseloads for staff within the profession and acknowledged that the nature of the work was incredibly challenging.

Referring to the modernisation and integration of Social Care, one Member referred to the unintended consequences of the not-for-profit model introduced by Welsh Government. As Chair of the Planning and Development Committee, the Member advised that a letter had been written from the Committee, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member, to the relevant Minister but a response had yet to be received. The Planning and Development Committee had identified that private providers were purchasing, what were deemed as inappropriate dwellings to transform into private residential care homes. The Chief Executive was in support of Welsh Government's view that private businesses should not be profiting from the care of vulnerable children and young people but acknowledged that there were inadvertent consequences in terms of destabilising the marketplace. It was explained that it had become increasingly challenging to meet the placement sufficiency duties for children looked after and how to transition safely to a not-for-profit model. In response to the situation, the Council had almost doubled its in house residential capacity during the last 18 months but it was recognised that pressures remain, given the increase in demand and complexity of needs. The Chief Executive acknowledged the concerns of the Planning and Development Committee that some of the dwellings were inappropriate, but added that as part of the planning process, the homes would need to be regulated by Care Inspectorate Wales.

A Lay Member took the opportunity to thank the Chief Executive and the team for the robust self-assessment and commented that the document was pragmatic, realistic and aspirational. The Member advised that from his experience, the community and partners were complimentary of the Council's governance arrangements.

One Member praised the report for its detail but felt that it was late in the year to be considering the 2022/2023 self-assessment, to which officers acknowledged and advised that arrangements are being made for it to be brought forward earlier next year.

The Member noted that within the document, it had been identified to strengthen arrangements for service user engagement and equality, diversity, and inclusion. The Member sought clarity on how this would be progressed. The Chief Executive noted that the two points were additional priorities arising from the self-assessment during the year. The Chief Executive advised that there was already good practice in terms of effective engagement across the Council, such as the co-production exercise with service users and families to remodel learning disability services, engagement with developing town centre regeneration strategies with the business community and the adoption of the Council's Participation Strategy. However, the Chief Executive acknowledged

that there was more work to be undertaken to strengthen the arrangements. In relation to equality and diversity, the Chief Executive fed back that good progress had been made, which was reflected in the annual equality report. However, it was noted that staff have encountered behaviours that do not adhere to the Council's expectations and thus, focussed work had been undertaken with the Senior Leadership Team to develop the organisational culture and values further to make expectations more clear to staff along with the Council's on-going commitment to this area. Members were assured that the work would feature in the Council's new Strategic Equality Plan and the new Corporate Plan in the New Year.

The Chair thanked officers and Members for the contributions and the Governance and Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To review the draft Self-Assessment at Appendix 1 of the report and considers whether it is an accurate and robust reflection of the position of the Council and its services and meets the requirements of the [Local Government and Elections Act 2021 Part 6](#);
2. To note the progress made in respect of the improvement themes identified in 2021/22 Self-Assessment;
3. To provide observations or recommendations, as deemed appropriate, to the Chief Executive for the Committee's feedback to be included in the report to Council in January 2024; and
4. To note that following approval of the Self-Assessment by Council, the document will be published within four weeks of it being finalised.

(Note: County Borough Councillor G. Hopkins left the meeting during discussions.)

38 2023/24 MID YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT STEWARDSHIP REPORT

The Service Director - Finance Services provided the Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise Treasury Management information presented to Council on 29th November 2023. The Council report was attached at Appendix 1 and detailed the Council's Treasury Management activity during the first six months of 2023/24 and prudential and treasury Indicators for the same period.

The Service Director confirmed that Rhondda Cynon Taf had complied with all relevant Codes of Practice with regards to Treasury Management, this being CIPFA's Code of Practice on Treasury Management and the Prudential Code.

Members' attention was drawn to section 5 of the report, which outlined the economic background for the first half of the financial year. The Service Director noted that UK inflation remained high over much of the period, keeping expectations elevated of how much further the Bank of England would increase rates. However, inflation data published in the latter part of the period was lower than expected, causing financial markets to reassess the peak in the Base Rate. This was followed very soon after by the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) maintaining the Base Rate at 5.25% in September and it was explained that it had remained at this level up to and including the recent decision on 13th December where MPC members voted again to maintain the

rate at 5.25%.

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The Service Director drew Members' attention to section 6 of the report, which outlined the borrowing activity. Members were informed that the Local Authority had continued to maintain its low-risk strategy, using "internal borrowing" with no new external borrowing undertaken during the year and operating within budget.

Members were informed that sections 8,9 & 10 contain a suite of Treasury Management and Prudential indicators and are compliant with limits set by full Council on 29th March earlier this year.

Members were also informed of details within sections 11 and 12 demonstrating the low-risk strategy associated with the approach to investments with an investment return just slightly lower than the benchmark rate.

The Service Director updated the Committee in respect of the contractual arrangements in place with the current Treasury Management advisors, Arlingclose. It was explained that the contract had been extended until March 2024 and that the procurement process had begun for a new contract beginning April 2024.

The Chair thanked the Service Director for the informative update and was pleased with the Council's approach.

The Governance and Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To scrutinise and comment on the information provided; and
2. To consider whether they wish to receive further detail on any matters contained in the report.

39 TO CONSIDER PASSING THE FOLLOWING UNDER-MENTIONED RESOLUTION:

It was **RESOLVED:** "That the press and public be excluded from the meeting under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act (as amended) for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of the exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Part 4 of the Schedule 12A of the Act".

40 CYBER SECURITY RESILIENCE

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, the Service Director of Digital and ICT provided the Governance and Audit Committee with information in respect of cyber security resilience and its importance within the Local Authority.

Following consideration of the PowerPoint presentation containing exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended), namely information relating to the financial affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information), the Governance and Audit Committee

RESOLVED:

1. To note the information provided.

41 PROGRESS UPDATE AGAINST THE ANTI-FRAUD, BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023/24

The Service Director of Pensions, Procurement and Transactional Services and the Operational Manager for Revenues and Corporate Fraud provided the Governance and Audit Committee with the progress made to date against the Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption work programme for 2023/24.

Following consideration of the report containing exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended), namely information relating to the financial affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information), the Governance and Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To note and review the outcomes of the anti-fraud work progress during 2023/24; and
1. To provide direction and guidance where necessary within the Terms of Reference of the Committee.

(Note: Lay Member, Mr M Jehu left the meeting during discussions.)

42 URGENT BUSINESS

The Director of Legal and Democratic Services advised that the following item of urgent business would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information and recommended that the meeting remain exempt from the press and public.

The Governance and Audit Committee therefore **RESOLVED:** "That the press and public remain excluded from the meeting under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act (as amended) for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of the exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Part 4 of the Schedule 12A of the Act".

(Note: At this point in proceedings, officers from the Regional Internal Audit Service left the meeting, following advice from the Director of Legal and Democratic Services that there was a risk that the discussions to follow will result in a conflict of interest).

With the Chair's permission, the Deputy Chief Executive and Group Director for Finance, Digital and Frontline Services provided the Governance and Audit Committee with an update on the Internal Audit Service report containing exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended), which had been considered and agreed by Cabinet on 18th December 2023.

Following discussion, the Committee **RESOLVED** to note the update.

This meeting closed at 7.07 pm

**Mr C Jones
Chair.**