



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY 2022-2027 COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee held on Wednesday, 27 September 2023 at 5.00 pm at the .

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

County Borough Councillors – The following Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee Councillors were present in the Council Chamber:-

Councillor J Edwards (Chair)
Councillor B Stephens
Councillor M Ashford
Councillor R Davis
Councillor S Evans

The following Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee Councillors were present online:-

Councillor R Bevan	Councillor J Bonetto
Councillor Sheryl Evans	Councillor C Middle
Councillor G L Warren	Councillor S Morgans
Councillor K Morgan	Councillor K Webb

Co-Opted Members in attendance:-

Mr M Veale

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Mr G Black, Community Safety and Strategic Partnerships Manager
Ms G Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services
Ms L Davies, Director, Public Health, Protection and Community Services
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Ms S Daniel, Principal Democratic Services Officer

18 Declarations of Interest

In accordance with the Code of Conduct the following declarations were made pertaining to the agenda:

Councillor Sera Evans – I am an employee of the University of South Wales and will leave the meeting for the consideration of Item 5 International Student Migration in RCT

19 Minutes

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on the 17 July 2023 as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

20 Consultation Links

The Principal Scrutiny Officer reminded Members of the consultations that are open should they wish to respond to them.

21 Bi-Annual Cabinet Member Engagement

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members to allow them the opportunity to scrutinise the decisions undertaken by the Leader within the period set out in the report and to ensure the appropriate mechanisms are in place to effectively scrutinise the Executive.

A Member referred to the Office accommodation and Investment priorities report and asked the Leader for reassurance in respect of the presence of the RAAC materials locally, and the state at which our own surveys and inspections are, in light of recent discoveries of the product at buildings owned by neighbouring Local Authorities.

The Leader responded that the priority in this regard has focussed on schools and reassured that whilst buildings are regularly inspected by engineers and surveyors as a matter of course – they have been re-inspected in light of the recent situation. The Leader added that further inspections are being carried out on the Council's care homes and they are further liaising with the third sector to ensure any commissioned services are also reviewed.

A Member referred to the Investment priorities report and asked for further detail for the priorities for Porth.

The Leader responded that the Investment priorities are aligned to the Corporate Plan, with Cabinet being guided by this. He added that work on the Porth Transport Hub is coming to a conclusion and they are currently working with Transport for Wales on a handover. He added that further regeneration work in Porth Town Centre will be explored utilising TRI Funding which has been secured with private developers to support economic growth and development. The Council has also purchased a small section of land in Hannah Street which we are looking to develop into a small short stay car park to alleviate some of the parking issues in Porth.

A Member referred to the ongoing traffic situation in Treorchy and thanked officers who have been in daily contact with them and for meeting with the Councillor and local businesses. She referred to the challenges that residents and visitors to the town centre face with pressure on traffic which is often at a standstill with no trains to alleviate the traffic and bus timetables scaled back. She commented that ongoing and sustained help was needed for the businesses in the area as they are worried that they will have to close down due to the issues they face.

The Leader recognised the current situation is extremely challenging in the upper Rhondda at present and acknowledged that the current situation cannot continue. He advised that several meetings have been held with commuters and residents with options currently being reviewed with the Traffic Management

company. He informed Members that they are currently 3 weeks ahead of schedule and everything possible is being undertaken to ensure work continues efficiently to enable the road to be fully open as soon as possible.

A Member referred to the investment priorities and asked what is the process involved in reaching those priorities in respect of maintaining our highways and footpaths and whether maintenance or repair work took priority.

The Leader responded that highway intervention is part of the priority to ensure that immediate risk is taken away. For example, if a pot-hole becomes dangerous, it would be filled to ensure safety and then added to a long list for future repairs for a permanent solution. He informed Members that the Authority used to have high insurance claims, but these have reduced and for this reason the intervention criteria has changed. The Leader recommended that Members receive a presentation at a future engagement session.

A Member asked for more detail on the Local Flood Risk Management Plan and Action Plan.

The Leader responded that the biggest part of the strategy is working with residents to identify and understand the risks we face. Unfortunately, RCT has the highest surface water flood risk of any Local Authority in Wales. He advised Members that Pentre and Treorchy are two areas that major longer term investment plans are being taken forward for. He added that the maps online that show the surface water flood risk are key parts of the Flood Risk Strategy as they raise awareness to businesses and individuals on the risk area. A report to Cabinet last year informs of a dedicated member of staff who undertakes engagement to raise awareness of the plan and ensure they understand the risks if there is a yellow weather warning in place, He concluded that further capital investment bids will continue to be sought for this.

A Member asked what impact the subsidised bus travel scheme had over the summer.

The Leader advised that in March we saw a 35% increase in bus usage, then it was free for the month. The following month, when the charges were back in place, there was a 7% increase. Following this evaluation, we introduced a £1 flat fee for bus usage over the summer months. He advised that they were still awaiting the data for usage for this time, although an increase has been reported. A further evaluation will then take place following September and October usage but we are looking to repeat the subsidy again, hopefully in December. He reported that he had received positive feedback around how some families had saved a lot of money during the school holidays by taking advantage of the subsidy.

A Member noted that Government Relations forms part of the Leader's role and asked what this looked like.

The Leader responded that he attends regular meetings with UK Government and Welsh Government regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up funds and, as WLGA Leader, he has regular meetings with the Welsh Secretary and Michael Gove. He added that all South East Wales Council Leaders are the representatives for the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal and set out the Local Government position on various topics. He concluded that irrespective of political party, their priorities are to ensure the best possible outcomes for residents by ensuring a collaborative cross-party approach.

A Member raised concerns around the quality of work and the state that footpaths had been left in following the installation of fibre broadband. He asked what the Council is doing to ensure they do not inherit the cost of repairs.

The Leader acknowledged that the situation with the installation has been unacceptable and the work has been well short of the required standard, noting that existing companies have been stood down and engagement has since been undertaken with other providers. He urged Members to report any poor workmanship and reinstatement, and indicated that we will use our Highway powers to enforce the repairs or recharge the companies for the costs incurred by the Council.

A Member referred to the cost of living support packages that had been provided and was welcomed by our residents. The Member asked if a more targeted means of supporting residents during the cost of living was considered, for example, a number of local authorities stepped into fund school holiday free-school-meals.

The Leader responded that, before the school summer holidays, he requested that officers look at a cost of living support package with the intention to present this for consideration by Cabinet before winter. He commented that whilst energy costs have reduced, they will still be comparatively high as no UK wide energy support scheme funding will be available this year so families will still be feeling the financial pressure. He concluded that the Council has continuous engagement with organisations such as Interlink, Citizens advice and Community Co-ordinators to understand the pressures on families and recognised that it was not just those eligible for free school meals that are feeling the pressure.

The Chairperson thanked the Leader for attending and thanked Members for their questions.

It was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Scrutinise the Leader & Cabinet Member for Infrastructure in respect of matters considered and agreed by Cabinet, and key decisions taken, during the period 1st May – 20 September 2023.
2. Identify any areas arising from those matters determined within this period which Committee wish to further scrutinise, as part of revisions to the Committees published work programme.

22 International Student Migration in RCT

The Community Safety And Strategic Partnerships Service Manager presented the report which provided Elected Members with an overview of the emerging relocation and migration trends of International Students and their families arriving in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Following conclusion of the presentation of the report the Chair invited public speaker, Natalie Evans, a Campaign Coordinator from Rhondda Food Bank to address the Committee on this item. The public speaker was thanked for her contributions and the Chair then invited the Committee to give their observations

and ask questions of the officers present.

A Member commented on the additional financial pressure placed on the Council as a result of migrant students and their families choosing to relocate to the area and asked if Welsh Government are supporting the Council's finances.

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services advised that migrant students should demonstrate that they are able to support themselves during the application process. Where it becomes an issue that they are unable to continue to support themselves it is then a matter for the home office / visa issue. The Director continued that the Authority has engaged with the University of South Wales (USW) who has increased the level of support available to the students who choose to bring their families with them. The Director added that information is provided to families before they make a decision to bring family to reside with them in the UK so anyone arriving into RCT will understand those challenges before they arrive, however, it remains a personal decision of those students to bring their families with them knowing the potential risks. It is for this reason that additional funding is not made available to Local Authorities to enable us to provide further support.

Another Member commented that they were pleased to hear USW are offering more support to students during the process but would like to see more being offered. The Member continued that the students should be supported to understand the financial implications they will have once they arrive as these students could be our future doctors and nurses and could benefit our community in the longer term. The Member added that the Authority should explore how we can further help the students and their families who want to come to the UK to study and work.

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services advised that Welsh Government are currently consulting on rent control as there is currently no law regulating rent increases on homes in Wales, rented from private landlords and the UK is experiencing increased rental charges throughout. She added that the Council has a long-standing commitment to resettlement, however this is a very specific cohort as restrictions apply on their visa which restricts their access to work and public funding and that they are in the UK to study. Should they remain in the UK at the end of their study, they will require employer sponsorship.

A Member was pleased to hear that USW are providing improved support to students. The Member also noted that the cohort in question had no recourse to public funds and asked if the Authority were satisfied that there are no safeguarding issues present in the families with young children. The Member acknowledged the increasing pressure on budgets but from an ethical position, the Member asked could the Council provide more support?

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services reassured the Committee that the Council understood their responsibilities of protecting children and vulnerable people and stated that safeguarding measures are in place for people, regardless of their status. She also advised that if families find themselves homeless they can contact the Council as there are discretionary measures which can be applied on a case by case basis.

The Director Education and Inclusion advised that schools are and will be vigilant and sensitive to the needs of their learners. She added that the Authority

are rolling out universal free school meals across the County Borough and are currently ahead of schedule. She added that the Authority also has Family Engagement officers in schools who offer support and signpost families accordingly. She also advised that there are other support initiatives also available such as the Big Bocs Bwyd and school uniform recycling.

A Member stated that USW needs to be more proactive in assisting students in helping them find part time employment and housing before they arrive in the UK, families can then relocate near to employment opportunities rather than remote locations with less employment opportunities.

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services advised that USW are increasing and improving their support services but the difficulties arise when students decide to bring their dependents with them. USW are aware that students can access employment, but their priority is that their students continue to progress academically. She reassured Members that the Authority continues to actively work with USW and the message that they are currently focussing on is to advise that the students arrive without their family until they have secured accommodation and employment.

A Member expressed concern around the eligibility aspect of using a food bank where they need to obtain a voucher from USW to evidence their need to use the food bank. The Member felt that anyone who approaches a food bank for support should receive support as there is already a lot of stigma attached to using food banks. The Member stated that as there is no recourse to public funding, the families are also not able to access free school meals and asked for an update on the rollout of free school meals to all primary school pupils in RCTCBC. The Member commented that it is important to recognise the long term impact that students will bring to the economy and culture of our communities with many of them are already highly qualified in their own countries. She asked how the Council are engaging with USW on this matter. The Member commented that it would have been useful to have a representative from USW present this evening to engage in discussions.

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services advised that whilst wider support is available to students it is important that we are supportive and welcoming across *all* resettlement programmes; there is a piece of work currently being undertaken by the Community Cohesion Group with third sector partners to ensure that all parties are aware of the services that are available and to ensure that access to the information is available to all on arrival in RCT.

On the Foodbank eligibility, the Director stated that whilst the decision is not within the Council's remit, she advised that the purpose of the inclusion of the eligibility criteria is to ensure students have access to all support services and information available to them and to receive sufficient support from USW should they be suffering from hardship. USW are best placed to support them.

The Director Education and Inclusion advised that as this cohort within the report have no recourse to public funds, they are not currently eligible for free school meals, however, all children in years Reception to Year 2, are entitled to a Universal Primary Free School Meal, which is being extended to Years 3 and 4 from September 2023 and Year 5 and 6 from April 2024.

A Member queried if the figures in the report were just in relation to USW or if they included other universities too. The Member also stated that it would be

good to understand the impact on our education system and social services and therefore any detrimental impact on our communities.

The Director Public Health, Protection and Community Services advised that the figures relate to UK data, however the Authority engages mainly with USW to understand the demographic of students arriving in to RCT. If the Authority becomes aware of students living in RCT and attending other universities, then engagement will take place with those universities. The Director added that we do not hold the data on students who may permanently resettle here following conclusion of their studies as this would be home office data. The Director also reassured Members that whilst there is a well-established connection with education, the current data shows that no additional pressures are currently being placed on Children's Services despite safeguarding arrangements in place and available should there be concerns raised.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services advised that feedback is extremely positive and families are not adding to pressures on central services. Where there are concerns, the schools are very proactive in addressing them.

The Chair thanked officers and the representative from Rhondda Foodbank for attending the meeting and highlighted Members concerns around the support available to students, the offer of Free School Meals to families in this cohort and Safeguarding issues. The Chair also commented that future meetings where this item is discussed should extend an invite to representatives from USW to attend. The Chair concluded that with Members agreement a letter be sent to the Cabinet Member responsible for this area to request that an Officer Working Group be set up to ensure a cohesive approach is taken with partners to address the issues raised at the meeting.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That Members scrutinised the content of the report and the information relating to emerging migration patterns of International Students and their families arriving in RCT and the potential impact on schools and existing council services.
2. Noted that the Director of Public Health, Protection and Community Services and the Director of Education and Inclusion Services will continue to work with the University of South Wales and community partners to ensure appropriate support is provided to the students and their families living in RCT.

To write to the Cabinet Member to request that an Officer Working Group is established to address the issues raised and to ensure a cohesive approach is taken forward

23 Child Poverty Notice Of Motion

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members for them to consider including the Notice of Motion that was referred by Council following its meeting on the 29th March 2023, in relation to Child Poverty, to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for its consideration.

A Member commented that they were supportive of the approach but would like to ensure that a full and detailed approach is taken forward on this and sought reassurance that we do not lose sight of the original Notice of Motion.

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications replied that the Council acknowledges that there are many different responsibilities they have in respect of tackling Child Poverty and also many interventions that Welsh Government direct the Authority to take. He also advised that in considering the Notice of Motion, the Overview and Scrutiny will report its findings back to full Council. The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications concluded that the report outlines the work that has previously been undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the work will be in line with the approved Notice of Motion.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED**:

1. To agree the inclusion of this matter as part of the work programme of the Overview & Scrutiny, in line with the Committee's Terms of Reference.
2. Agreed to invite two members of the Education & Inclusion and Community Services Scrutiny Committees to form part of consideration of issues relating to Child Poverty. In addition, and if not already a member of the Committee, an invitation to the mover and seconder of the original Notice of Motion will also be extended to assist the discussions.
3. Authorised the Head of Democratic Services to amend respective work programmes, and report the intended inclusion of the adopted Notice of Motion by Council on the 29th March, within wider considerations relating to the new Corporate Plan.

24 Draft Education and Inclusion Work Programme

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members to seek Member's comment and approval on the draft Work Programme of the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee as approved at their meeting on the [19 July 2023](#)

The Chair of the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee was pleased to present this Work Programme to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their approval and asked that the item in which the Cabinet Member is scheduled to attend their Scrutiny Committee is rescheduled as soon as possible. She also commented that the list of "unallocated" items on the Work Programme demonstrates the breadth of the Committee's remit and also the engagement and interest from its Members. The Chair of the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee concluded that whilst the Child Poverty Notice of Motion will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, she requested that this still remain an item for inclusion for the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee in October.

Following discussion it was **RESOLVED**:

1. Members considered, where appropriate, any items which could be presented to the Committee as Information Reports, to allow Members the flexibility to consider any urgent items to be brought forward for Members consideration

- potentially freeing up time for more urgent items to be scrutinised.
2. Agreed which matters (if any), should be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, or other thematic Scrutiny Committee for inclusion in their individual Work Programmes in accordance with the Committees Terms of Reference.
 3. Agree on any additional issues for inclusion on the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme for the 2023/24 Municipal Year, as set out in Appendix A with appropriate amendments as necessary.
 4. That consideration of the Child Poverty item remains within the published work programme of the Education & Inclusion Scrutiny Committee.

25 Council's Performance and Resources Report (Q1)

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications introduced the report to Members on the Quarter 1 Council Performance Report to 30 June 2023. He advised of the importance this information provides to the scrutiny process, particularly in terms of service delivery, but also in terms of informing matters for further consideration based on the performance information provided. He added that under the terms of reference, it is the responsibility of this committee, to refer any exceptions identified to the relevant subject scrutiny committee for further consideration.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services presented the report to Members that detailed the quarter 1 position statements for revenue and capital budget performance; Treasury Management prudential indicators; Organisational Health information including staff turnover, sickness and Council strategic risks; Corporate Plan priority action plans (including performance indicators and investment); and the Council's on-going programme of work to tackle Climate Change.

Following conclusion of the presentation, the Chairperson invited Members to ask questions.

A Member asked if the average number of sick days can be provided so Members can compare the Authority to the national average per year per member of staff.

A Member asked for further information on the targets that had been missed in respect of Cultural Spaces.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services fed back that with regard to the recruitment of a Digital Officer to the One4All and Library Service to improve the digitisation offer within the service, discussions are taking place with the Council's Digital Transformation Team with the intention to progress recruitment in quarter 3 of this year. In respect of developing the Treorchy Cultural Hub, the Service Director fed back that due to a member of staff recently leaving the service, work is currently underway to consider how these actions can be supported moving forward.

In response to a query in relation to staff sickness and staff retention within the Children's Service Directorate, the Service Director advised that an update was provided to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee around the Children's Services Strategy which included information on the workforce strategy and initiatives such as a healthy workforce and a 'grow your own approach' which is a key part of the Strategy. He advised that further information would be

requested from Children's Services on the 'grow your own approach' and the work undertaken in this area by the University.

Following conclusion of the report it was **RESOLVED**:

1. To note the Council's financial and operational performance position as at 30th June 2023 (Quarter 1).
2. To receive information in relation to staff sickness and the 'grow your own approach' within the Children's Services Workforce Strategy.

26 Urgent Business

None

27 CHAIRS REVIEW AND CLOSE

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg / This document is also available in Welsh

**Councillor J Edwards
Chair.**