



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY 2022-2027 COMMITTEE

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny 2022-2027 Committee held on Wednesday, 13 December 2023 at 4.00 pm

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 online:-

Councillor J Edwards (Chair)

Councillor B Stephens	Councillor M Ashford
Councillor R Bevan	Councillor J Bonetto
Councillor R Davis	Councillor Sera Evans
Councillor S Emanuel	Councillor Sheryl Evans
Councillor C Middle	Councillor S Morgans
Councillor G L Warren	

Co-Opted Members in attendance:-

Mr M Veale

Officers in attendance:-

Ms G Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services
Ms A Richards, Service Director for 21st Century Schools and Transformation
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Mr S Williams, Director for Highways, Streetcare and Transportation Services
Ms L Kidner, Business Manager, Catering
Mr A Critchlow, Parking Services and Streetworks Manager
Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Ms S Daniel, Principal Democratic Services Officer

Apologies for absence

Councillor K Morgan

39 Declarations of Interest

In accordance with the code of conduct there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

40 Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings of the 31 October 2023 and 13 November 2023 were approved as true and accurate reflections of the meetings.

Councillor Sera Evans requested that full names are used in the minutes for Councillor Sera Evans and also Councillor Sheryl Evans to avoid confusion over

attendance.

41 **2024-25 Budget Consultation (Phase 1)**

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report for Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be consulted and to formally respond to the first phase of the Council's 2024-25 Budget Consultation. Members were advised that the Committee's feedback will be incorporated into a Budget Consultation report, alongside all other feedback received from stakeholders, for consideration by Cabinet as part of developing a draft Revenue Budget Strategy for 2024/25. The draft Revenue Budget Strategy will then be pre-scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of phase 2 of the Budget Consultation process in early 2024.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services then provided Members with a [presentation](#) on the phase 1 Budget Consultation.

A Member commented that the Council should better communicate to residents how the Council's reserves are used as there is common misconception that the Council has surplus funds. The Member also commented that whilst they understood that residents are all navigating a cost of living crisis, the Council still has a duty to set a balanced budget.

A Member commented that we need to continue to protect and prioritise the education budget and invest in our children and young people.

A Member asked how the Council engages with the public when consulting on the budget and was pleased to note that engagement has taken place with young people.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services advised that specific locations are selected to ensure we maximise the opportunity to engage, face-to-face, with the public and there are a team of officers at each consultation event to assist and answer questions. The Service Director continued that the engagement so far had been good with many young people also getting involved in the consultation via consultation events at specific secondary schools.

The Co-opted Member referred to the earmarked reserves for specific projects and asked if the Council can review the projects to ensure they are going ahead and if not, the funds be reallocated. The Co-opted Member also questioned scrutiny's role in identifying efficiency savings and how the Authority are working together with other Local Authorities to collaborate and effect savings.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services fed back that £105m, around 53%, of the Council's reserves have been committed to deliver the current Capital Programme and on-going investment in infrastructure, with other reserves set aside for specific purposes such as managing on-going projects and key risks. The Service Director confirmed that reserves are kept under on-going review and are reported to elected Members at least twice a year to provide options for specific reserves to be re-prioritised, where appropriate, to support additional investment in Corporate Plan priority areas. The Service Director went on to cover the process of identifying budget savings and fed back that the Council's approach is organisation wide and led by the Senior

Leadership Team. The Service Director added that the Council's Section 151 Officer coordinates review and challenge sessions with senior officers to identify efficiency saving opportunities that protect frontline services and noted that due to the size of the forecasted budget gap for the next financial year of £35M, the process has necessitated the reporting of service change proposals to Cabinet for consideration of whether they should progress to a public consultation process. The Service Director also fed back that the budget review work considers opportunities to collaborate with other organisations, with agreed budget savings built into the budget and in-year financial performance updates reported to the Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of quarterly Performance Reports.

In response to a question around the proposal of an increase in Council Tax, the Service Director responded that current indications are that many local authorities across Wales will be consulting on council tax increases of 5% and above, with Rhondda Cynon Taf's proposed position being at the lower end of this scale.

A Member asked if the Council has explored the option of income generation from our land and industrial buildings and selling assets that we no longer use or have a requirement for. The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services fed back that the Council does generate income from a number of specific buildings it owns and keeps all of its assets under on-going review to ensure income opportunities are maximised and asset sales are considered where in the best interests of the Council. The Service Director added that these processes also include engagement with businesses and prospective developers with the aim of attracting inward investment to the County Borough.

A Member referenced some Local Authorities in England issuing Section 114 notices and asked what the contributing factors to these were and can Members be reassured that robust financial management is in place to stop the Council getting to such a position.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services advised that there are consistent themes around governance arrangements where section 114 notices had been issued by local authorities in England, for example, leadership arrangements and decision making processes. The Service Director went on to cover some of the Council's arrangements, feeding back that robust financial planning and management arrangements are in place, as demonstrated through the consistent setting and delivery of balanced budgets, to support the achievement of Corporate Plan priorities. The Service Director also noted that the Council has an open and transparent approach to decision making and reporting of performance, with scrutiny committees being a key part of these arrangements. The Service Director added that the Council's arrangements are underpinned by well trained staff and referred to positive reports from the Council's external auditor, Audit Wales, for example, clean audit opinions on the Council's annual statement of accounts.

With regard to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the Committee did not highlight any proposed changes to the current arrangements in place.

Following conclusion of the discussion it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Provide feedback on the Council's 2024-25 Budget Consultation.

2. Request the Service Director for Democratic Services & Communications to provide Cabinet with the feedback of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

42 SCRUTINY OF SERVICE CHANGES SUBJECT TO CONSULTATION

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members to seek their feedback to formally respond to the Council's consultations on the Continuation of Free Breakfast Club Provision in Primary and Special Schools with the Introduction of a Charge for the additional childcare element and Review of the Council's Home to School Transport Policy

Following discussion, the following feedback, questions and comments were received from Members:

Continuation of Free Breakfast Club Provision in Primary and Special Schools with the Introduction of a Charge for the additional childcare element

A Member asked what the impact on staff will be who run the current Breakfast Club Service and will the staffing levels be able to accommodate any change to the service.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services explained that whilst the impact on staff is difficult to predict at this stage, the impact is not anticipated to be significant and if the demand for the provision increases the service will need to ensure there are appropriate staffing levels in place. The Director acknowledged that recruitment within Catering Services is challenging and having vacancies in this service is fairly typical, and provided reassurance that this will be monitored closely.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services advised that so far, the Community Engagement events had not been well attended but significantly higher responses had been received online. The Director fed back that the emerging themes show that some respondents have asked for flexibility around the charging of 5 days per week as many do not use the service every day. The Director commented however that flexible charging arrangements would come with added administration costs so a balanced view will need to be taken. Several other Members echoed this point as not all families will need to use the facility 5 days per week. Members asked that this element be reviewed and a more flexible option considered prior to a final decision being taken.

A Member was concerned that we are adding to the financial pressure of families who are already struggling with the cost of living crisis and asked if there were alternative options that can be explored.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services replied that the Authority does already provide a range of support for families and provided reassurance that the proposal will maintain the current free school breakfasts that are typically available from 8.30am. The proposed charge is for the childcare provision from 8am. The Director added that the consultation feedback will be captured and will be reported to Cabinet for consideration as part of the decision making process.

In response to comments around the timing element where some schools start their provision later, the Director of Education and Inclusion Services advised that the start / finish times are determined by each individual school and in line with their school day. The Director continued that the service will work with the school leadership teams to ensure a consistent approach is taken and provided reassurance that each school will provide the opportunity for all pupils from nursery to Year 6 to access a free breakfast meal, regardless of start / finish times.

Review of the Council's Home to School Transport Policy

A Member highlighted concerns they had received from parents and carers around safe walking routes and asked for further clarity on what is considered as a safe walking route and asked that this be communicated with the public.

The Director of Highways, Streetcare and Transportation Services advised Members that the safe routes will be reassessed to ensure the route is safe for walking for pupils. He added that as part of the review process, pavements, dropped kerbs and crossing points are considered and they are independently reviewed.

A Member asked what the likely impacts on attendance would be as a result of the proposals as they had concerns that this would affect attendance in socially deprived areas.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services fed back that the Authority prioritises and invests in improving attendance on an on-going basis, for example, dedicated family engagement officers have been funded and recruited to support the re-engagement of children in education. The Director advised that work in this area is ongoing and there is a task force in place reviewing attendance across the whole of Wales. The Director added that Rhondda Cynon Taf is currently 1 of 4 Local Authorities in Wales that provide home to school transport provision over and above the statutory legal requirement.

A Member asked if the Authority had considered where schools have relocated and the effect this may have on pupils' attendance as children will now have to travel further at a potential higher cost or will have further to walk.

The Director Highway, Streetcare and Transportation Services advised that it was the parent(s)' choice where their children attended school and this proposal covers the Council's statutory home to school transport provision. The Director continued and fed back that we may see a change in balance with pupils choosing to be educated at different schools.

Members raised concerns that the proposals may have a detrimental impact on the Authority achieving the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan as pupils attending Welsh provision currently, may now opt to attend an English school should this make travel arrangements easier. The Director of Education and Inclusion Services fed back that as part of the proposal, a Welsh Language Impact Assessment has been undertaken and the key themes will be reported to Cabinet for consideration as part of the decision making process.

Members also expressed concern at the negative impact the proposal will have on children living in poverty. A Member commented that children who are impacted may need to walk further, get up earlier for school and therefore may

be less likely to attend. The Member also considered that this may impact negatively on the Council's carbon footprint with more cars on the road likely as a result.

The Director Highways, Streetcare and Transportation advised that it was acknowledged that whilst this will be a change for some families, there are also positive impacts on health and wellbeing with safe walking routes accessible for families. The potential of additional traffic will be considered as part of the safe routes to school re-assessment and consultation feedback, and alongside this, work with Transport for Wales will take place on alternative transport options.

In response to a question the Director Highways, Streetcare and Transportation advised that the Authority will not be able to charge for spare seats on buses in the future due to regulations being enforced where all vehicles where a charge is levied will need to be wheelchair accessible.

Following consideration of the report it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Consider responding as consultees upon the proposals detailed below in paragraph 5 (of the 'RCTCBC Consultations' report).
2. Consider as a Committee, to provide further comments, observations or recommendations in respect of these proposals prior to Cabinet consideration.
3. Request the Service Director for Democratic Services & Communications to provide Cabinet with the feedback of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

43 Council's Performance and Resources Report (Quarter 2)

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications introduced the report to Members on the Quarter 2 Council Performance Report to 30 September 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 2 positions 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 noted the high level of staff sickness in specific service areas and asked if this is being monitored and how staff are being supported to be well at work.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services advised that the

Council's Human Resources Service provide targeted support to services to support staff returning to work as timely as possible and noted that Social Services continue to experience particular challenges in terms of sickness levels. The Service Director fed back that arrangements are informed by real time information provided to service managers on staff attendance to inform timely action, with the Council's Occupational Health Service providing a wide range of support and treatments for staff.

A Member asked why there had been delays on some capital programme projects. The Director Highways, Streetcare and Transportation Services advised that this is in part due to delays with contractors which has been difficult to manage post pandemic as a result of supply and demand challenges. The Director added that the Council's Capital Programme represents significant investment across a large number of projects, and overall, these are delivered on time and budget, and indicated that the Council will continue to apply its robust project management arrangements with contractors to ensure on-going delivery of projects.

A Member highlighted the red and green ratings for 'progress to date' within Corporate Plan action plan updates and whether a further rating should be incorporated where actions were on track to be delivered by a future target date. The Member also referred to the Risk Register and suggested more narrative was needed to set out progress against controls and actions.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services noted that the feedback provided will be considered and, where appropriate, reflected within future reports.

A Member asked what impact the budget pressures have had on staff performance and is there enough support in place for them. The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services acknowledged that there are challenges across the Council's services and provided reassurance that priorities and workloads are closely monitored, and the Council is continuing to invest in staff training and development to support service delivery. The Service Director also referred to the Council's latest self-assessment that is scheduled to be reported to the Governance and Audit Committee later in December, this setting out, overall, a positive performance position alongside the challenges the Council faces.

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

1. Scrutinise the Council's financial and operational performance position as at 30th September 2023 (Quarter 2).
2. Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters contained in the report in line with the Terms of Reference of the Committee.

44 Urgent Business

None

45 CHAIRS REVIEW AND CLOSE

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

This meeting closed at 6.55 pm

**Councillor J Edwards
Chair.**