



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 Monday, 29 January 2024 at 5.00 pm

This meeting was recorded, 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 S Evans
Councillor S Evans	Councillor S Morgans
Councillor G L Warren	Councillor M Powell
Councillor S Emanuel	

Co-Opted Members in attendance:-

Mr M Veale

Officers in attendance:-

Mr P Mee, Chief Executive
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director, Finance and Performance
Mr C Hanagan, Service Director Democratic Services and Communications
Ms L Lawson, Performance Manager
Mrs S Daniel, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Mr J Rae, WLGA
Ms L Haywood, WLGA

Apologies for absence

Councillor K Morgan

1 Declarations of Interest

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

2 Minutes

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on the 13 December 2023.

3 Consultation Links

The Principal Scrutiny Officer advised of the open consultations and reminded

Members if they had any queries that they should contact the scrutiny team.

4 Welsh Government Consultation: A Fairer Council Tax

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members which invited them to formally respond to phase 2 of Welsh Government's [consultation](#) which sets out the proposals for a Fairer Council Tax system in Wales. He advised that the proposals aim to rebalance wealth and tackle inequality and create a tax system that is fair for everyone and connects people with communities.

The Chairperson welcomed John Rae and Lisa Haywood from the WLGA who were in attendance to provide an overview of the proposals and to answer any questions that Members had in relation to the proposals.

Following conclusion of presentation of the proposals, the Chair sought comments and questions from Members which are summarised below:

A number of Members fed back that whilst change is required to create a fairer system, it was considered that implementation of council tax reform from 2025 is too soon, with the consequences and impacts not being fully understood and the need for further public awareness and engagement. Members also highlighted the need for a clearer understanding of how proposed reforms would impact on local authority funding as a result of changes in the tax base and the consequential impact on the level of funding raised through council tax and allocated via the Revenue Support Grant, and specific reference was made to the limitations for Rhondda Cynon Taf due to its local tax base. A consistent theme fed back was the need to do it right and do it properly.

Members asked that when a new system is determined, regular, clear and concise information is communicated to residents so they are fully aware of how they will be affected by the implementation and what it will mean for them financially, this being even more important due to the on-going cost of living crisis. Members also urged that residents are notified well in advance of any changes being implemented to allow them to prepare financially.

A number of Members were disappointed with the content of the Welsh Government consultation material and fed back that they did not feel it provided sufficient information to ensure the public and stakeholders were fully informed; therefore, there was a risk that consultees may not be able to provide meaningful feedback on the consultation questions. Specific information was fed back in this regard to aid future public engagement through providing illustrative examples of what the financial impact could be for an average household per tax band. Members highlighted that Welsh Government should provide further opportunities for engagement on the proposed reforms.

Members raised a number of concerns in relation to the re-valuation of the tax bands, particularly Band A at £112,000, which will result in many residents in the Rhondda Cynon Taf area being pushed into a new Band B tax band. Members were concerned that this will place additional financial pressure on residents who are already struggling with the costs of everyday living. Members urged that the proposed valuations are reconsidered and when valuations on homes are undertaken, the rationale for new tax bands are clearly communicated.

In discussing the three options, a number of Members remained concerned that there would still be an in-built unfairness in this system, and that an opportunity was again being missed to fundamentally reform this area. Members also expressed concern on the additional cost burden these proposals could create for properties of higher value and questioned the principle of connecting property values with households' ability to pay. An example was given that property values in the south of the County Borough are consistently higher than those in north, and that in many cases this can mean that working families have less disposable income in these areas. Some Members highlighted the need for Welsh Government to consider researching council tax systems operated in other parts of Europe. Members also noted that any future revaluations, that include social housing, could mean that properties are allocated to a higher Council Tax banding and therefore result in creating additional financial pressures and barriers for families looking to access the property ladder in the future, with some families also becoming eligible for Council Tax Reduction Scheme support.

Following conclusion, it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Authorise the Service Director Democratic Services and Communications to submit feedback to Welsh Government on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

5 'WORKING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES'-THE COUNCIL'S DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2024-2030

The Performance Manager presented the report, the purpose of which was for Members to pre-scrutinise and help to shape the new draft Corporate Plan for 2024/25 – 2029/30. The draft Plan provides a Vision for the County Borough in 2024 and sets out four draft Well-being Objectives and priorities for the following six years. The Performance Manager continued that the new draft Corporate Plan 2024-2030, seeks to build on the progress of the previous Corporate Plan(s) and has revisited its Vision, Purpose and Ambitions for the County Borough.

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, the Chief Executive sought feedback on the draft Plan from Members of the Committee, specifically in relation to its Vision and the four Well-being objectives. Following the conclusion of the presentation, the Chair thanked the officers for the information and invited feedback and observations from Members which is summarised below:

Vision

Members agreed with the proposed Vision statement, which they considered demonstrates ambition, but also highlights the challenges the Council face. The Committee suggested strengthening inclusivity within the Vision by the inclusion of the word "All" at the beginning of the statement.

Well-being Objective – People and Communities

Members were pleased to see that school attendance is referenced with the actions as this is high on the agenda for the Education and Inclusion Scrutiny Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also considered that there needed to be more explicit reference to Child Poverty within the Plan as well as a need to build aspiration for communities and young people in particular.

Members raised concerns at the use of hyperlinks throughout the Plan and recommended that the use of these are reviewed and used only where necessary to ensure the plan is accessible and easy for the public to read and understand.

Well-being Objective - Work and Business

Members expressed their broad support for the objective but raised concerns more widely, at the lack of apprenticeships available. Members urged that the availability of apprenticeships is reviewed to ensure that placements are available to inspire people to train and secure skilled work after college. There was also concern that the current national apprenticeship schemes are inflexible, which in turn deters smaller businesses which could offer a shared opportunity from offering placements. Members also indicated that they would like to see reference to high skilled work and also supporting people into rewarding career paths and not just jobs.

Members highlighted the traffic issues across the County Borough, including the Town centres and stated that communities need to be well connected with improved infrastructure and accessible, affordable public transport. Members also noted the value in local opportunities for residents to shop in smaller local retail areas, not just the focus on Town Centres.

Well-being Objective – Nature and the Environment

The Committee highlighted the issues the Council faced with increased problems with litter and fly tipping throughout the whole of the County Borough and its unsightliness. The Committee sought stronger wording throughout the Plan to highlight the importance of the public taking responsibility for disposing of their rubbish. They also recommended that there needs to be more education around the dangers and health impacts of litter, and noted the good work currently taking place in school projects with Waste Services. The Committee was keen to ensure cleaner streets across RCT and pride in our communities.

Well-being Objective – Culture and Heritage

Members emphasised the significance of the rich industrial heritage and also earlier history e.g. Iron Age, of Rhondda Cynon Taf and would like to see this considered throughout the Plan.

Members were invited to provide additional feedback directly to the Chief Executive or Performance Manager or directly through 'Let's Talk about What Matters' on the Council's Engagement Platform.

Additional comments

Members noted the stark health statistics in the data sections of the Plan both now and in the future, for health conditions particularly for obesity, not just RCT but UK wide. They indicated that they would like to see more emphasis on the Council's partnership working, particularly with the Local Health Board and the existing health initiatives, e.g. Health Weight Wales etc. to demonstrate how the Authority is working to address these concerns.

Members also acknowledged the range and scale of challenges identified by the data.

Members noted the volume of data within the Plan but also noted that this needs

to be utilised to inform work on the plan moving forward. Whilst acknowledging that the Plan contained the 'what' will be delivered, there was also a need to be clear about 'how' the priorities will be delivered, which in turn will help to identify the Outcomes.

Following discussion it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Form a view on the draft Corporate Plan 2024-30 and whether it sets out:
 - A clear vision and purpose for the Council.
 - The right priorities/Well-being Objectives for the Council, namely
 - Ø People and Communities
 - Ø Work and Business
 - Ø Nature and the Environment and
 - Ø Culture and Heritage.
 - The principal actions within each priority/Well-being Objective that will have the greatest impact to achieve the new Vision.
2. Consider whether the plan is sufficiently ambitious and balanced given the financial challenges facing the Council both now and in the future.
3. Note the wide ranging engagement activity currently being undertaken.

Note the strengthened alignment with the Sustainable Development principle as required by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

6 LOCAL AUTHORITY ARRANGEMENTS TO SAFEGUARD CHILDREN AND ADULTS AT RISK

The Chief Executive provided an overview of the work undertaken by the Council's Corporate Safeguarding Group and requested elected Members to scrutinise and comment on the new draft Corporate Safeguarding Policy. Members were reminded that the Council's Corporate Safeguarding Policy is subject to review every three years to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and to reflect developments in legislation or best practice.

The Chief Executive indicated that the policy has been reviewed against the Welsh Government and WLGA Corporate Safeguarding Good Practice Guide and reflects input on current safeguarding best practice from professionals working across the Council, including Children's Services, Adult Services, Human Resources, Procurement, Digital & ICT and others.

In conclusion, the Chief Executive advised that arising from the review, the Council has revised and strengthened arrangements in a new draft Policy set out in Appendix 1 for Member's consideration.

A Member referenced the number of staff respondents in the survey and requested feedback on what percentage this represents compared to the total number of staff within the Council. The Member also raised concerns around the Council's Corporate Safeguarding responsibilities in relation to lone working which now extends to office workers as well as those who worked alone in their day to day role prior to the pandemic and noted that any potential delay to lone

working policy and training may have safeguarding implications for staff.

The Chief Executive advised that every effort was made to ensure the survey was distributed and accessible to all staff, with just under 1,000 staff completing the survey compared to total staff numbers of approximately 10,500, and noted that of the staff that did respond a high proportion of staff fed back that they had a good level of understanding of safeguarding. The Chief Executive thanked the Member for the comments on lone working and assured the Committee that as part of on-going monitoring arrangements this will be picked up through Corporate Safeguarding Steering Group meetings. The Member raised a supplementary point specifically in relation to schools and the Chief Executive advised that a significant proportion of the 10,500 total staff numbers are school based, safeguarding checks are undertaken as part of internal audit visits to schools and the feedback from which is collated and fed back to the Corporate Safeguarding Steering Group.

A Member asked how the new arrangements will be communicated to schools to ensure they consider and incorporate the latest guidance within their own policies. The Chief Executive advised that the Corporate Safeguarding Steering Group includes the Director of Education and Inclusion Services who has been involved in the review of the policy. The Chief Executive added that subject to approval of the policy, this will be communicated across the Council, including schools, to raise awareness and ensure it is built into the local safeguarding policies of schools.

A Member referred to the Forms of Exploitation section in the report and referenced that Hate Crime is listed under this section, and indicated that this is not considered to be a form of exploitation or protected characteristic. The Chief Executive thanked the Member for the observations and fed back that further clarity would be sought on the points highlighted.

Following conclusion of discussions, it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Scrutinise the Council's corporate arrangements for the safeguarding of children and adults at risk including the new draft Corporate Safeguarding Policy, and
2. Scrutinise the new Delivery Plan for 2023-25 and progress to quarter 2, and

Request the Service Director for Democratic Services & Communications to provide Cabinet with the feedback of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in respect of the new draft Corporate Safeguarding Policy.

7 URGENT BUSINESS

8 Budget Consultation 2024-25 Phase 2

The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications presented the report to Members to be consulted on and for the Committee to formally respond to the second phase of the Council's 2024-25 Budget Consultation.

The Service Director advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is requested to pre-scrutinise the draft 2024/25 Revenue Budget Strategy, as part

of the second phase of the 2024-25 Budget Consultation process.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services then gave a presentation to Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered the following areas: Introduction – 2024/25 Draft Revenue Budget Strategy; The Council's Current Financial Position (2023/24); Phase 1 Budget Consultation – Headlines; Provisional Local Government Settlement 2024/25 – Headlines/Implications for Rhondda Cynon Taf; Cabinet Proposed Budget Strategy 2024/25; and Next steps and key dates.

A Member was pleased to see that 63% of respondents to the phase 1 budget consultation process fed back that the Council should continue with its strategy on reserves, recognising that reserves cannot be used every year without being replenished.

A Member fed back that the number of responses to the first phase of the consultation seemed disproportionate in comparison to the number of people living in Rhondda Cynon Taf and asked if there was an opportunity to learn from this and use different engagement strategies.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services indicated that the Council considers its arrangements on an ongoing basis to learn lessons, with a comprehensive approach to engagement in place that includes face-to-face events in town centre locations, engagement with third sector partners and schools, and also through the use of social media.

A Member asked if the Council are doing enough to educate people on the work of the Council, so they can better understand its finances, how funds are spent and its different functions.

The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services fed back that the Council aims to make available information to aid residents' understanding of the Council's finances and where it spends public money, and provided examples in the form of an easy read guide produced for budget consultation purposes; a leaflet included within Council Tax notices to residents that provides a breakdown on the Council's budget and how it is spent and also how the Council is funded; and engaging directly with school-based learners through consultation processes. The Service Director Democratic Services and Communications added that the number of consultees referenced in the presentation does not reflect on-going communication activity the Council undertakes via its social media channels and noted that a number of separate public consultation processes have also been undertaken in recent months linked to the budget setting process that have received high levels of engagement from the public.

A Member asked if demographic information in relation to individuals responding to the budget consultation was available to analyse. The Service Director Finance and Improvement Services fed back that this information is captured and can be used to inform on-going consultation arrangements.

A Member of the Committee commented that whilst increasing Council Tax is never popular and is a decision that is not taken lightly, the Council also need to ensure the necessary funding is in place to provide a wide range of vital services to our residents.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED** to:

1. Pre-scrutinise the draft 2024/25 Revenue Budget Strategy as part of phase 2 of 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

9 Chairs Review and Close

The Chair thanked Members and Officers for their attendance at the meeting and for their thorough contributions.

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

This meeting closed at 7.36 pm

**Councillor J Edwards
Chair.**