



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 13TH NOVEMBER 2018 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Pritchard - Chair
Councillor G. Kirby - Vice-Chair

Councillors:

M. Adams, Mrs E.M. Aldworth, K. Etheridge, L. Harding, G. Johnston, C.P. Mann, J. Ridgewell, R. Saralis, J. Taylor, L.G. Whittle

Cabinet Members:

C. Gordon (Corporate Services), Mrs B. Jones (Finance, Performance and Governance)

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), L. Donovan (Head of People Services), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Councillor G. Johnston to his first meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs C. Forehead, Miss E. Forehead, Mrs D. Price, Mrs M.E. Sargent and Mrs L. Phipps (Cabinet Member for Homes and Places).

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

4. MINUTES – 2ND OCTOBER 2018

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd October 2018 (minute nos. 1 - 11) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

There had been no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

6. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

The Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the reports from Councillors C. Gordon, Mrs L. Phipps and Mrs B. Jones, which provided an update on their respective portfolios, and had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.

Councillor C. Gordon (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services) provided updates on the Council's Budget Consultation process and savings proposals for 2019/20, developments across Human Resources, and digital innovation developments and new technology across Customer and Digital Services. Cabinet recently agreed to the use of £500k from a Directorate underspend for Invest to Save initiatives to support this technology, for which the payback period will be achieved in the region of 2-4 years.

Queries were received on the number of blue badges issued by Caerphilly compared to other local authorities, and the steps that the Council has taken to protect personal information in light of changes to data protection legislation. It was arranged for Officers to circulate this information to Members following the meeting. A Member highlighted delays in some housing payments being marked as received when made via the post office and the Corporate Director offered to explore the matter following the meeting. The Committee discussed budget consultation methods used by other authorities to determine service rationalisation and how these could be adopted by the Council. Officers also provided further information on new Customer Services technology being utilised by the Council.

Councillor Mrs B. Jones (Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Governance) provided an update on the draft Budget Proposals for 2019/20 which will be subject to public consultation following presentation to Cabinet. A Members' Seminar to discuss the proposals will be followed by a series of special Scrutiny Committee meetings during December 2018. Members were reminded that the Council cannot continue to operate in its current form and needs to look at alternative ways of delivering services.

As Councillor L. Phipps (Cabinet Member for Homes and Places) had given apologies for the meeting, the Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of her report, which provided updates on Property Services and Universal Credit. Members were also pleased to learn that the "Free From Fear" domestic abuse project developed by the Council and Gwent housing partners recently achieved the national Pat Chown Capturing Creativity Award.

Members discussed the implications of Universal Credit across the county borough, which have resulted in a significantly increased workload for housing staff. Officers outlined the processes being undertaken to mitigate the impact of the changes for both staff and claimants and to support tenants in making and managing claims. In response to Members' concerns over the wider implications of the new Universal Credit regime given the number of council tenants across the borough, it was explained that the changes only relate to new claims at the present time and that 80% of Council tenants are in receipt of housing benefits. The Housing team will monitor the scheduled migration of existing legacy benefits to Universal Credit (date to be confirmed) and will be providing additional training to staff ahead of this roll out. A Member suggested that Welsh Government should make funding available to mitigate resource pressures and the Scrutiny Committee agreed that a recommendation be made to WG in this regard.

The Cabinet Members were thanked for their reports.

7. POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Cath Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services) presented the report, which outlined details of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period November 2018 to April 2019. Members were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet Work Programme as appended to the report and to suggest any changes to its content.

The Committee noted the Update on Reserves report being presented to Cabinet on 30th January 2019 and were in agreement that it be moved from the list of Information Items and scheduled as a discussion item for the Committee on 15th January 2019. Members were advised that since the publication of the papers, a report on the final stages of the WHQS Programme had been scheduled for Cabinet on 30th January 2019 and the Committee agreed that it be presented to them for consideration on 15th January 2019. In view of the maximum of four agenda items per meeting, the Committee agreed that the report on Wellbeing Objective 3 (6-Monthly Update) be moved to Information Items for 15th January 2019 and the Council Tax Premiums report be rescheduled to a date to be confirmed.

Subject to the foregoing amendments, it was unanimously agreed that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Council's website.

8. CABINET REPORTS

None of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda had been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

9. AGILE WORKING PRINCIPLES – PRESENTATION

The Scrutiny Committee received a slideshow presentation from Lynne Donovan (Head of People Services) on the principles of agile working.

It was explained that agile working is a transformational tool that enables organisations to work smarter by eliminating all barriers to working efficiently. It uses communications and information technology to enable people to work in ways which best suit their needs without the traditional limitations of where and when tasks must be performed. Agile working can support staff to have more autonomy over where and when they work. This practice is based on the complete flexibility of work to drive long-term organisational success and can unlock value for both the employer and the employee.

Members were advised of the catalysts and drivers for agile working and the need to identify the types of roles that can support agile working. With this in mind, a table top exercise will be cascaded to all Heads of Service across the Authority to determine whether their departments are able to support agile working principles. By mapping every job in their service area, Heads of Service will be able to identify how much flexibility can realistically be achieved for each role, and the exercise will lead to the development of an agile working model which suits that service area. It was emphasised that one size will not fit all and that agile working will be dependent on the needs of each service area. Heads of Service have also been asked to consider the results of this exercise when reviewing business continuity plans to support service provision during inclement weather, for

example. Upon completion of the exercise and piloting the results, the feedback from Heads of Service will be used to develop an agile working policy and how it can be supported by existing flexible working policies.

The Scrutiny Committee were also advised of the policies that underpin agile working, with it explained that the Council already offers numerous benefits aimed at making it easier for employees to balance home and work life commitment, with agile working having the potential to complement this suite of policies.

The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Head of People Services for her presentation and queried how many employees could benefit from agile working principles. It was explained that this will depend on the needs of each service area, but that feedback is encouraged from all Council departments and that the proposals are not restricted to office-based staff. Members discussed the positives and negatives of agile working across other authorities, and Officers explained that following a settling in period to allow staff to become accustomed to the changes, the practice generally brings about greater flexibility and increased workforce productivity. Cost benefits include the potential to reduce sickness absence. The Scrutiny Committee expressed the importance of team working practices and Officers explained that employees across other local authorities utilise technology such as video conferencing and hold weekly team meetings to maintain connectivity.

It was queried whether agile working practices could realistically be achieved and Officers outlined the need to embrace cultural change and offer a wider range of working flexibility to Council staff. A Member highlighted the need to monitor the system in order to ensure staff wellbeing and ensure that the practice is not being abused, and also emphasised the need for staff to give consideration to their home and work life balance when working from home to ensure they are not working excessive or unusual hours. Officers referred to the flexible benefits of agile working in that some staff may choose to work outside normal office hours, but gave assurances that any such policy will be robustly monitored and that management expectations will be set out in advance of the principles being implemented.

Having discussed the item, the Scrutiny Committee fully endorsed the principles of agile working and welcomed the potential benefits it could have for Council working practices.

10. HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2018-2022

Shaun Couzens (Chief Housing Officer) presented the report, which outlined the Gwent Regional Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022 and sought the views of Members on its content, prior to its presentation to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group for consideration and thereafter Cabinet for approval.

Members were advised that the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 requires all Welsh local authorities to undertake a review of their homelessness services and produce a four year homelessness strategy to address the issues identified. The five local authorities in Gwent have responded to the requirement by working together to produce a regional strategy, delivered through local and regional action plans. A regional approach was approved by Welsh Government and this takes into account the need to consider more partnership and cross boundary working. The Strategy has been developed from the findings of an extensive regional consultation and review. Local Authorities across Wales are required to implement their homelessness strategies by 31st December 2018. A copy of the Strategy and supporting documents was appended to the report for Members' information.

It was explained that the Gwent Homelessness Review 2018 (an extract of which was appended to the report) defines the scale of the issue across the region and within Caerphilly, and analyses the nature and extent of homelessness in Gwent. The strategy document (Appendix 2) contains four key priorities and ten strategic objectives. A regional

action plan (Appendix 3) has been developed which in Caerphilly's case, also contains the local actions that the Council intend to deliver through the term of the strategy period (attached at Appendix 3). The Equalities Impact Assessment for the Strategy (Appendix 4) outlined the extensive consultation that has been undertaken with relevant Council Officers and via online surveys with service users who have experienced homelessness.

During the course of the debate, clarification was sought on the Council's housing duty in respect of homelessness cases, and it was explained that this duty rests with Authority for which the homeless person has a 'local connection'. Therefore priority will be given to homelessness cases where their connection is to the Caerphilly county borough, and other cases will be redirected to the relevant local authority, although Caerphilly Council will assist in emergency cases where the need arises. It was noted that the regional approach will enable the five local authorities participating in the Strategy to share good practice in respect of tackling homelessness within their areas.

Reference was made to point 5 of the action plan which outlined the need to reduce homelessness for younger people and support their wellbeing. A Member sought clarification on the contents of the education package being developed and it was explained that this will include a package of materials to support care leavers on how to manage and sustain their independent living arrangements. Members were advised that the Council is working with the other local authorities and a number of other agencies to develop a regional approach in this regard. A Member queried if there were any particular areas of the borough where young people are more at risk of homelessness and Officers indicated they would look into this query following the meeting. In response to a query on the homelessness intervention approach for younger people, it was explained that the Council will examine each case to identify the problems being experienced and the support required, and ensure that the young person is connected to the correct resources in order to improve their circumstances.

Discussion also took place regarding the availability of social housing, together with housing affordability in certain areas of the county borough. It was noted that the Council is considering options to bring empty properties back into use and is also examining other options via a regional approach, such as the use of shared housing or developing new temporary accommodation to reduce instances of homelessness. Arising from the discussions at the meeting, it was agreed that a joint Members' Seminar in respect of homelessness across the county borough, and the implications of Universal Credit, be arranged in due course.

Following consideration of the report and having noted its contents, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendation be referred to Cabinet for approval. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that the Gwent Regional Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022 be approved.

The meeting closed at 7.13 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 15th January 2019, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR