



CABINET

MINUTES OF THE REMOTE MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY, 14TH OCTOBER 2020 AT 10.30 A.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor P. Marsden (Leader) - Chair

Councillors:

S. Cook (Social Care), N. George (Waste and Public Protection), C.J. Gordon (Corporate Services), S. Morgan (Economy and Enterprise), L. Phipps (Housing and Property), J. Ridgewell (Environment and Infrastructure), E. Stenner (Performance and Customer Services) and R. Whiting (Learning and Achievement).

Together with:

C. Harryy (Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director – Education and Corporate Services), D. Street (Corporate Director – Social Services and Housing) and M.S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director – Communities).

Also in Attendance:

A. Cullinane (Senior Policy Officer - Equalities, Welsh Language and Consultation), L. Donovan (Head of People Services), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), S. Isaacs (Rents Manager), M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), L. Lucas (Head of Customer and Digital Services), S. Richards (Head of Education Planning and Strategy), R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), C. Evans (Committee Services Officer), K. Peters, Corporate Policy Manager

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations made at the beginning or during the course of the meeting.

3. CABINET – 30TH SEPTEMBER 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 30th September 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4. CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – TO NOTE

Cabinet were provided with the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, which detailed the scheduled reports from 9th September 2020 to 28th October 2020. Members were reminded

that the Cabinet Forward Work Programme is a working document and therefore subject to change.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the Forward Work Programme be noted. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Forward Work Programme be noted.

5. STRATEGIC EQUALITY PLAN – ANNUAL MONITORING AND IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2018-2019

The report informed Cabinet of the progress made during the financial year 2018-2019 against targets in the Council's current Strategic Equality Plan, and for Cabinet to approve for submission to the Equality and Human Rights Commission and publication online.

Cabinet noted that the Council has a statutory duty to produce an annual monitoring report on Equalities issues under current legislation. The requirements are very detailed as to what relevant information must be included in the annual monitoring and improvement report (attached as an appendix to the report).

It was noted that the amount of information presented is therefore in order to ensure that the regulatory body involved (the Equalities and Human Rights Commission) are provided with full evidence of the Council's compliance and commitment to those statutory duties.

The Strategic Equality Plan – Annual Monitoring and Improvement Report must be published by the 31st March the following year. In March this year the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) wrote to all local authorities to advise that they had taken the decision to suspend their compliance check on the publication of annual reports and Strategic Equality Plans until October. This decision was taken as a recognition of the incredibly difficult circumstances within which listed bodies are operating due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. For this reason, although the 31st March 2020 deadline is passed, it is expected that the EHRC will be tolerant of the delay.

Cabinet thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

A Cabinet Member sought further information around the spike in reported cases of bullying and raised concerns that racism seemed to be normalised, around Spring 2018 and whether this could be linked to the EU Referendum. Officers explained that there is a trend that suggests this and there appears to continue to be a similar spike following 'Black Lives Matters', however, Members were assured that there are a number of programmes in place to mitigate this and, since it is Black History Month, there are a significant number of projects and events underway in schools and across the borough to raise awareness.

A Cabinet Member sought further information around the data around gender pay gap and raised particular concern, in light of the economic impact of Covid-19 and the implications on women who are in both caring and financial supporting roles and efforts to reach a parity on this. Officers explained that the data was provided by HR, however work is underway to gain a better understanding of the impact the Pandemic has had on the job market, which will be realised as the furlough scheme comes to a close at the end of the month. Considering previous trends however, the Council ensures to treat staff equally, making jobs available to all, regardless of gender. Traditionally women tend to take the part time roles, in order to juggle other commitments in their home lives, but Members were assured that these roles are not actively targeted at women. Work is however underway to consider how the Council can do things differently and consideration will be given to a number of factors, an example could be reviewing how job descriptions are written.

A Cabinet Member sought further information in relation to working hours of part time jobs. Officers explained that often the roles are more of a reflection of society, where women choose part time posts, sometimes working more than one job, which offers the hours that suit their personal lives, this is felt to be a positive opportunity for the Council and offering flexible posts to the community. Members were assured that the data reflects the gender pay gap, and not an equal pay issue. The Chief Executive added that the Flexible Working Report is to be considered later in the agenda, and should Cabinet be minded to approve, will help a number of people to access more jobs, possible full time or higher pay, due to the proposal to make roles more flexible, in order to assist with work life balance.

A Cabinet Member sought further information on the bilingual websites, noting that there are still several microsites that are not bilingual. Officers explained that there is a work programme in place in order to gradually decommission these sites, moving them to more accessible and bilingual sites, which will achieve compliance. Members were assured however that the Caerphilly Council website is available bilingually. It was agreed that Cabinet be provided with the details of the work programme for the microsites.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the report be approved. By way of electronic voting, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers Report, the annual monitoring and improvement report be approved for submission to the Equality and Human Rights Commissioner and published online.

6. FLEXIBLE WORKING

The report, which was considered by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 29th September 2020, sought approval of Cabinet, for a more formal approach to flexible working, which builds upon the progress made in respect of working in a flexible manner throughout the lockdown.

Cabinet noted that because of the speed and nature of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Council was required to equip and train a significant proportion of its workforce to work and to provide services remote from their usual places of work and, in many cases, from home.

While the transformation to this new model of service delivery happened at a significant pace, the technology platforms that have formed the foundations of remote working have proven to be intuitive and stable.

Some sections of the workforce have been operating remotely and very effectively since the beginning of lockdown and, over time, further services have been enabled and brought back online with much less of a reliance on buildings, premises and travel.

Cabinet noted that this has enabled many services to the public to be delivered safely and continuously and for the Council's employees to manage multiple aspects of their professional and personal lives in a way that has brought about a much greater balance than was previously possible.

It was noted however that not everyone has found the isolated nature of working remotely a positive experience and the results of the Flexible Working survey provide a healthy note of caution. Whatever the Council does from here on in, must be truly flexible and meet the differing needs of its employees, as well as reducing any operating costs associated with service delivery.

Cabinet thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

The Corporate Director wished to thank the Officers and Trade Unions for their multiple efforts in moving this agenda forward and outlined the significant benefits to the proposal.

A Cabinet Member, in thanking Officers for the work that has been undertaken, not just in collating the report but across the Authority, sought further information on the support provision in place for members of staff who are or will struggle with home working. Officers explained that Managers have been advised to keep in regular contact with staff, this message is also regularly reiterated by the Chief Executive in weekly messages. However, it was noted that this is a two-way process and 'My Time/ My Time Plus' has recently been launched, which encourages staff and managers to have a conversation around their workloads, wellbeing and any issues they may have. In addition, Officers explained that training will be provided to Managers around agile working and managing their teams in this way. Trade Unions are also key in this process.

A Cabinet Member wished it noted that the well-being of staff is fundamental for an effective workforce, and therefore regular contact is essential, but also to ensure that staff are not working over and above their normal working hours, thus jeopardising their work/life balance.

In addition, a Cabinet Member expressed how important Mental Health and well-being is during home/ agile working and, in noting the report, was confident in the measures in place and support systems and that the benefits outweigh the negatives.

The Chief Executive added that as a result of the global pandemic of Covid-19, accelerated learning has taken place and the authority was turned on its head, with most staff working at home. It has encouraged the flexible working proposal to be taken forward however, and can see that post Covid-19, there will not be 100% of staff working from home or 100% of staff working in buildings, but a hybrid system will be in place with a system for managing performance, wellbeing and outcomes. Members were assured however that whilst the asset rationalisation agenda has been mentioned within the report, this is not an immediate priority, but an opportunity for a later date.

Cabinet were reminded that there has also been significant support offered to staff through the Care First Service and support pages have also been provided on the Intranet. Members were also assured that the Chief Executive has addressed the issues of working excessive hours, and staff have been asked to raise this with their line manager should this would be required.

The Leader echoed the comments of the Cabinet and Officers and the changes made in a short space of time, to work in an agile way, in order to keep staff safe, but also reminded members not to lose sight of the opportunity it has presented to modernise the organisation. It is important however, that staff are brought along, and it is evident from the staff survey that a 'one size fits all' method is not suitable. The flexible working proposals support the transformation agenda and members were reminded that 'work is a thing we do and not a place we go'. The Flexible working proposals encourage and enable people to manage their work/life balances and create opportunities for employment. A blended approach is the way forward.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By way of electronic voting this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's Report and the additional recommendation from Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee (ix): -

- i) The benefits of the flexible working arrangements that have supported service delivery across the council since March 2020 be acknowledged.
- ii) The flexible working principles set out at Appendix 1 of the report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee be adopted as a core principle for supporting

service delivery.

- iii) The Head of Paid Service, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member be delegated authority to determine on a service by service basis, the optimum approach to flexible working and accommodation requirements;
- iv) Consideration be given to the current flexi system and how it can be aligned with and support the principles of flexible working through ongoing discussions with trade unions;
- v) The potential investment associated with the deployment of flexible working in relation to IT equipment and furniture as well as potential savings that can be generated through the rationalisation of buildings and reductions in other operating expenditure be noted;
- vi) Additional reports be received, as required, to agree funding and any associated HR and IT Policy changes that may be required;
- vii) The proposal to set aside an initial on-off sum of £500k to be funded from capital earmarked reserves to ensure that the council can respond proactively in the short-term to commence the roll-out of flexible ways of working be endorsed;
- viii) The development of an appropriate training and development programme for managers and staff to ensure the benefits of flexible working are maximised be endorsed;
- ix) A special meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee be held in order to consider in detail, the principles of flexible working and its impact on staff, service users and communities.

7. CASH HANDLING

The report, which was considered by Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 29th September 2020 provided Cabinet with an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cash payments, and also asked Cabinet to consider the steps that need to be taken in the short-term, and the medium to longer-term to ensure continuity of income levels.

Cabinet noted that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on income levels for the council for a range of reasons. These include the temporary closure of income generating services, the closure of cash offices and the economic impact of the pandemic on residents and businesses.

Section 5.2 of the report provided details of the key activity currently being undertaken in the areas where cash payments have traditionally been of significant financial value. Particular attention was drawn to the doorstep cash collection service provided by Caerphilly Housing which was temporarily withdrawn in March 2020 when 'lockdown' was announced.

Cabinet were advised that the tenants using the service have all been contacted by the Rents Team and informed that the service could not be provided in the short-term and were assisted to either make payments at the post office or via telephone payments to the contact centre. Members were assured that the proposed consultation outlined in the report, for the longer-term, will ensure that all tenants are listened to and will be provided with an appropriate response.

Cabinet noted that prior to the lockdown, the rent collector spent a great deal of time travelling across the county borough to collect payments on a fortnightly basis. Officers outlined that

this method costs the Authority £6.75 per transaction. By changing to either post office or telephone payment, tenants can pay weekly at their convenience.

It was noted that should the doorstep collection service cease on a permanent basis, the rent collector will be transferred to the tenancy support team who can support any tenants in difficulty.

Cabinet also noted that in terms of wider payments, there are no immediate plans to reopen the cash offices and that prior to the implementation of the recent 'local lockdown', the potential for offering a limited cash payment service at Ty Penallta was considered. However, on balance it was concluded that the potential benefits for reopening the cash desks at Ty Penallta were outweighed by the disadvantages.

Cabinet thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

The Cabinet Member for Housing wished to express her sincere thanks to the Rents Team for their hard work and efforts in contacting and supporting tenants and assisting them to make alternative payments during the early stages of the pandemic.

Cabinet were pleased to note the report and the extensive work undertaken by the rents team making collections and offering support to the vulnerable tenants, as well as assisting to increase the footfall in post offices.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By way of electronic voting this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the officer's report: -

- i) That current service users be consulted on the termination of the doorstep collection service for housing rents and Council tax;
- ii) That subject to the outcome of the consultation being supportive of the decision to terminate the doorstep collection service be delegated to the Chief Housing Officer and Cabinet Member;
- iii) That the option of reopening the cash desks in Ty Penallta is not pursued at this time as the potential benefits are outweighed by the disadvantages. Alternatively, it is proposed that we continue to build on the good work undertaken in recent months to promote further channel shift as our current default position;
- iv) That the medium to longer-term service offer should be determined by the pending review of customer services and the wider reviews that will be undertaken as part of the strengthening team Caerphilly report that was approved by Cabinet on 22nd July 2020.

8. CASHLESS CATERING SOLUTION - SCHOOLS

The report, which was considered by Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 29th September 2020 provided an update on the current position with regards to the Council's Cashless Catering solution in schools and sought Cabinet agreement for further funding to expand the provision.

It was noted that a Cashless catering provision allows pupils and parents to pay for school lunches via an online payment solution, enabling cash handling and associated administration to be significantly reduced in schools.

There is a cashless catering system currently operating in 9 of the secondary schools, which needs updating due to IT advancements, 10 primary schools (operating as part of a pilot) and 65 primary settings have no current cashless catering provision.

A procurement process has been undertaken and will be finalised if funding is approved.

It was noted that due to the recent events of Covid-19, it has become an urgent requirement for schools to reduce the amount of cash handled. The implementation of the cashless catering system would enable the service to significantly reduce cash payment for school meals and other school activities. The system will also support teachers and staff to keep pupils in individual classrooms.

Cabinet noted that the system will also enable schools to prevent any discrimination between paid and free school meals pupils.

Each individual school's administration officers will be able to support parents without online access. This support will consist of an online account being set up on behalf of the parent by the school's administration team.

The system will also provide additional features to allow parents to pay for school uniforms, trips and activities, photographs, tuck shops etc.

The system would also allow the accounting and administration of the payments for visitors and staff meals without cash payments being required.

Other efficiencies are also envisaged such as reduction/ elimination of the need for a secure cash collection service.

Cabinet thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

Cabinet noted that there is an urgent requirement to update the IT infrastructure within schools. The upgrades being undertaken in schools, as part of the Ed Tech Programme, will allow investment in canteen areas, provide modernisation and equality for staff.

A Cabinet Member, in noting the overdraft facility in place for one meal, queried whether this could be a little more generous. Officers explained that the flexibility for this exists and will be at the school's discretion to implement.

A query was raised in relation to the maintenance costs of the system and Members sought reassurance that schools are happy to fund these costs. Officers explained that that the system, installation and admin costs of just under £500,000 is being met in full by the Local Authority and therefore Members were assured that schools were keen to take up the system and were happy with meeting the on-going maintenance fees from year 2.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By way of electronic voting this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officers Report: -

- i) The proposal to proceed to purchase the cashless catering solution for 84 school settings be agreed;
- ii) The residual funding requirement of £246.5k be met from Education and Corporate Services Reserves.

The meeting closed at 11.53am.

Approved and signed as a correct record subject to any corrections made at the meeting held on 28th October 2020.

CHAIR