



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE DIGITAL MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER 2020 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

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

Councillors:

M. Adams, Mrs M. E. Aldworth, Miss E. Forehead, L. Harding, G. Johnston, C. P. Mann,
B. Miles, R. Saralis, Mrs M. Sargent, G. Simmonds, L. Whittle

Cabinet Members:

C. Gordon (Corporate Services), Mrs E. Stenner (Finance, Performance and Customer
Services), Mrs L. Phipps (Housing and Property)

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), S. Harris (Head of
Financial Services & S151 Officer), L. Donovan (Head of People Services), L. Lucas (Head of
Customer and Digital Services), M. S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director - Communities),
S. Richards (Head of Education, Planning and Strategy), M. Lewis (Principal Officer Catering),
M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), J. Lloyd (Headteacher, Ystrad Mynach Primary School),
L. Dallimore (Unison Branch Secretary), S. Isaacs (Rents Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson
(Scrutiny Manager), E. Sullivan (Senior Committee Services Officer), S. Hughes (Committee
Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs C. Forehead and J. Taylor.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 25TH FEBRUARY 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on
25th February 2020 (minute nos. 1 – 9) be approved as a correct record and signed by
the Chair.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

C. Forbes-Thompson, Scrutiny Manager, presented the report which outlined details of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the period September 2020 to November 2020. Members noted the items listed for discussion at the next Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting to be held on Tuesday 10th November 2020. Members were advised that there are currently no items listed on the Forward Work Programme beyond the next meeting. S. Harris, Head of Financial Services & S151 Officer, informed Members that the standard reports relating treasury management, use of reserves and the budget will be populated in the Forward Work Programme for the same timescales as in previous years.

Members were also advised of a joint Scrutiny meeting to be held in December for all committees to discuss the budget and performance, details of this meeting will be sent out in due course.

By way of Forms voting (and in noting there were 11 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) it was unanimously agreed that the Forward Work Programme, as appended to the meeting papers, be published on the Council's website.

6. CABINET REPORTS

There had been no requests for any of the Cabinet reports to be brought forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

7. CASHLESS CATERING SOLUTION - SCHOOLS

With approval from the Chair and with the Committee in agreement, the Cashless Catering Solution - Schools report was brought forward on the agenda.

Councillor Mrs E. Stenner, Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Customer Services, introduced the report to update Members on the current position with regards to the Council's cashless catering solution in schools and to seek endorsement of a recommendation to Cabinet for further funding to expand the provision.

It was explained that a cashless catering provision would allow 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. Members were informed that there is a cashless catering system currently operating in 9 secondary schools, and 10 primary schools who are operating as part of a pilot. 65 primary settings have no current cashless catering provision. A procurement process has been undertaken and will be finalised if funding is approved.

Members were made aware 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 payments for school meals and other school activities. The system would also support teachers and staff to keep pupils in individual classrooms. It was noted that a real benefit of this system is that it would enable schools to prevent any discrimination between paid and free school meal pupils.

It was highlighted that each individual school administration officer 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 administration team. The system will also provide additional features to allow parents to pay for school uniforms, trips and activities, photographs, tuck shop etc. The system would also allow the accounting and administration of the payments for visitors and staff meals without cash payments being required.

J. Lloyd, Headteacher for Ystrad Mynach Primary School, attended the meeting to provide Members with an overview of the pilot scheme, which has been in place at Ystrad Mynach Primary School for the past two years. Members were informed that the system has been welcomed and is used by 94% of parents. It was highlighted that the system allows parents to make online payments to the school, view the menu selection made by their child and view an up to date statement of account balance. It provides peace of mind for parents who can see the meals their children are purchasing.

Members were informed that a time and labour study undertaken at Ystrad Mynach Primary School highlighted that the introduction of this system has effectively saved 10-12 hours per week of the School Clerks time, thus allowing the School Clerk time to undertake other administrative duties within the school. The system also ensures that the School Cook gets accurate information on meal requirements and children in receipt of free school meals are not differentiated from other children. A recent audit has found the system to work very well with no issues reported. J. Lloyd expressed how beneficial the cashless catering solution has been for both the school and the local community.

Clarification was sought with regard to how parents who are not using the system will manage, considering the current Covid-19 restrictions and the need to social distance. J. Lloyd was able to reassure the Committee that Covid effective strategies are in place to protect staff, parents and children.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the system used at schools which are currently not using Caerphilly Catering. It was explained that the system outlined in this report covers the schools that are operated by the in-house provider Caerphilly Catering, however additional schools are able to join throughout the contract duration subject to implementation costs being secured.

Members expressed concerns regarding the proposal that the authority meets the installation, training, hardware and software costs and maintenance costs for the remainder of the financial year, with the maintenance costs from year two on being met by individual schools and whether it is affordable. Officers explained that schools are aware of the proposal and no negative feedback has been received. Schools would see the redirection of staff time as a significant benefit to the school which would more than warrant the cost of the yearly maintenance charge. The benefits a cashless catering solution would bring to schools including time and efficiency as well as the potential increased uptake of free school meals, and the subsequent financial benefits to the school were highlighted.

Assurance was sought regarding the reliance of the cashless catering system and if schools could opt out in the future. Members were advised that a very robust procurement process was undertaken to secure this system and the contract includes appropriate break clauses to safeguard the Authority. Members were informed that schools want this system and they accept the charges because of the benefits that will result in terms of efficiency and accountability.

Members discussed how arrears in payments will be dealt with and sought assurance that

children will still be provided with a meal. The Committee were assured that schools have built good relationships with parents and would address any arrears as soon as possible and that the school would ensure that a meal is provided.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Forms voting (and in noting there were 13 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

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

8. FLEXIBLE WORKING

Cllr. C. Gordon, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, presented the report to seek the views of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee of a more formal approach to flexible working that builds upon the progress made in respect of working in a flexible manner throughout the lockdown prior to its consideration and determination at Cabinet.

The Scrutiny Committee was advised 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.

Members were informed that 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. 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 possible previously.

It was highlighted 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.

Members were informed that the current pandemic has provided a stimulus to show the benefits of working in a more flexible manner. The progress made and the lessons learned over the last four months can directly shape the blueprint for future service delivery and redesign. Embedding flexible practices will enable the organisation to be ready to manage any future crisis as well as reflect the Council's need to remain an attractive and progressive employer.

L. Dallimore, Unison Branch Secretary, addressed the Scrutiny Committee to present the views of Unison. Members were informed that they are fully committed to working with the Leadership Team on this proposal and that significant gains can be made for the organisation and its staff if handled prudently and in partnership with the Trade Unions and Elected Members. A number of issues were highlighted for Members to be aware of when considering the proposals.

Members were asked to consider who within the organisation will benefit from flexible working. Given that initial costings and property rationalisation benefits have been discussed in the report it was assumed that the Leadership Team have a broad idea of numbers. Members were made

aware of the additional costs incurred by staff working from home, such as heating, lighting etc. and the possible impact on the wider community.

It was acknowledged that the benefits of flexible working are well documented in the report and it was noted that there can also be drawbacks. The wellbeing of the workforce is paramount, clear principles and boundaries must be set that are fair and see the benefits equitably dispersed. It was understood that not all parts of the organisation will benefit equally. In order to assess the optimum balance Members were informed that Unison would support an exercise being undertaken that will establish what the optimum working and accommodation ratios are, to be shared prior to any decisions being taken.

The flexible working system was discussed and reference was made to the decision that staff working away from the office would be asked to seek line manager approval in advance of working longer than their contracted hours. It was expressed how this decision has resulted in disappointment and confusion from Unison members. It was noted that this will require a fundamental change to many policies and procedures. L. Dallimore suggested that a selection of real-time service area pilot schemes be established to assess how HR policies and the management thereof will operate in practice in order to identify the benefits and pitfalls and allow time for resolution prior to any large-scale implementation. It was also suggested that Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken prior to any service change taking place.

Officers advised the Scrutiny Committee that the report does clearly indicate that there is still more work to do with regards to policy in consultation with Trade Unions and in consultation with staff and brought back to the Scrutiny Committee to be approved. It was highlighted that the staff survey indicated that the majority who responded were in favour of this approach, demonstrating there is a need for a balance between home working and flexible working. Members were asked to note that flexible working is not home working. Some employees will use their home as their office base, some will operate across multiple office buildings and some may even take advantage of working at times from other buildings. It was also highlighted that Trade Unions are generally in support of the approach to flexible working.

Members were in agreement that staff working from home will need support from management and fellow colleagues, particularly staff who are working in isolation or in challenging situations and highlighted the importance for staff to have a sense of belonging. Regular contact using Microsoft Teams and other informal communication should be undertaken to ensure appropriate safeguarding.

Members were advised that there are major benefits to the work life balance of staff and to the environment. There has been a significant reduction in the number of journeys undertaken by staff to and from work, which has resulted in a sizeable increase in air quality.

In terms of staff support Members were assured that it is fundamental. It is recognised that working remotely is not the same as working in the office and it is essential that managers have constant communication with their staff. Members were advised that this is a message that is constantly going out from the Chief Executive and is an expectation of managers. HR has met regularly with Trade Unions and is looking at what support can be provided jointly between the employer and Trade Unions for staff who may be having emotional and wellbeing difficulties at this time. Officers assured Members that regular team meetings are being held using Microsoft Teams.

Members agreed that it was important to consider the potential impact of working from home on those who may be isolated or at risk of domestic abuse. The need to consider how career paths and morale will be impacted was also mentioned.

Members raised concerns regarding asset management and property rationalisation and were assured by Officers that there are no plans at present to sell any assets as they would need to be sure the flexible working approach is working. Members were advised that it is an indication in the report that it is a likely possibility in the future, but further reports would need to come

forward with detailed proposals.

Members also asked for assurance that residents and members of the public were considered as part of this proposal. It was highlighted that 25% of the Caerphilly population do not have full digital skills, however there is still a need for them to access services. The Committee was advised that this has happened over the past six months, services have been maintained and members of the public have been supported due to flexible working. Members were also reminded of the Customer and Digital Strategy approved last year which has provided a flexible customer service. The flexible working approach would enhance this allowing the provision of a 24/7 service.

Members appreciated that this is the start of the process and felt it was important that the Scrutiny Committee is kept fully informed and consulted going forward. The Committee would like to see a further report in January 2021 that will include details on the issues raised by staff in the consultation and discussions by the Trade Unions on the impact upon staff, including their mental health with appropriate Equality Impact Assessments. It was agreed the report should also include the potential impact on communities if offices close.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Forms voting (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 1 abstention) this was agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (i) Cabinet acknowledge the benefits of the flexible working arrangements that have supported service delivery across the council since March 2020.
- (ii) Cabinet agree to formally adopt the flexible working principles set out at Appendix 1 of the report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee as a core principle for supporting service delivery.
- (iii) Cabinet delegates authority to the Head of Paid Service, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member, to determine on a service by service basis the optimum approach to flexible working and accommodation requirements.
- (iv) Cabinet note the need to consider how the current flexi system can be aligned with and support the principles of flexible working through ongoing discussions with Trade Unions.
- (v) Cabinet note the potential investment associated with the deployment of flexible working in relation to IT equipment and furniture as well as the potential savings that can be generated through the rationalisation of buildings and reductions in other operating expenditure.
- (vi) Cabinet agrees to receive additional reports, as required, to agree funding and any associated HR and IT policy changes that might be required.
- (vii) Cabinet endorse the proposal to set aside an initial one-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 new flexible ways of working.
- (viii) Cabinet endorses the development of an appropriate training and development programme for managers and staff to ensure the benefits of flexible working are maximised.

It was also moved and seconded that the following recommendation be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Forms voting (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (ix) Cabinet note the additional recommendation made that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee hold a special meeting in order to consider in detail the principles of flexible working and its impact on staff and service users and communities.

9. CASH HANDLING

Councillor Mrs E. Stenner, Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Customer Services, presented the report to provide the Scrutiny Committee with an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cash payments, and to consider the steps that need to be taken in the short-term and the medium to longer-term to ensure the continuity of income levels. The report also sought the views of the Committee on recommendations that will subsequently be presented to Cabinet for consideration.

Members were informed 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 our residents and businesses.

It was highlighted that total receipts have been reduced by some £2.7m, however Welsh Government funding has been confirmed for the majority of these losses but notably not for income lost on the Housing Revenue Account. Whilst cash payments were virtually zero between April and July 2020, Members were asked to note the channel shift to alternative types of payment methods being used by residents.

Members were referred to section 5.2 of the report which summaries some of the key activity currently being undertaken in the areas where cash payments have traditionally been of significant financial value, focussing in particular on the doorstep cash collection service provided by Caerphilly Housing which was temporarily withdrawn in March 2020. The tenants using this service have all been contacted by the Rents Team and informed that the service could not be provided in the short-term and have been supported to move to other payment methods. Members were asked to note that Caerphilly Housing offers a wide range of support services to these tenants.

The Scrutiny Committee was advised that consultation for the short-term was carried out with tenants in April 2020 when doorstep rent collections stopped due to the Covid-19 lockdown. All affected tenants were assisted to either make payments at the post office or via telephone payments to the contact centre. Members were assured that the 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. It was highlighted that Caerphilly CBC is now the only Council in Wales providing a doorstep rent collection service and it is proposed that current service users will be consulted on the termination of this service.

Members were also informed that the Rent Collector spends a great deal of time travelling throughout the County Borough to collect payments on a fortnightly basis. It was noted that this method costs the authority £6.75 per transaction and only cash payments can be made to the Rent Collector. The Scrutiny Committee were advised that should this service cease on a permanent basis the member of staff would be re-deployed to the Tenancy Support Team who provide a valued service.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Forms voting (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 0 abstention) this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that:-

- (i) Current service users be consulted on the termination of the doorstep collection service for housing rents and council tax.
- (ii) Subject to the outcome of the consultation being supportive the decision to terminate the doorstep collection service be delegated to the Chief Housing Officer and Cabinet Member.
- (iii) 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) 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 the 22nd July 2020.

The meeting closed at 7.55 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 10th November 2020, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR