



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD IN PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY 27TH JUNE 2023 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor G. Johnston – Chair

Councillors:

Mrs. E.M. Aldworth, C. Cuss, G. Enright, D. Ingram-Jones, C.P. Mann, A. McConnell, B. Miles (Vice Chair), J. Reed, J. Taylor, C. Thomas, A. Whitcombe, L. G. Whittle, and C. Wright.

Cabinet Members:

Councillors N. George, and Mrs. E. Stenner.

Together with:

Officers: R. Edmunds (Corporate Director of Education and Corporate Services), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), L. Donovan (Head of People Services), L. Lucas (Head of Customer and Digital Services), V. Doyle (Policy Officer), L. Lane (Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), L. Dallimore (Unison Branch Secretary), S. Richards (Head of Education, Planning and Strategy), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), and J. Lloyd (Committee Services Officer).

Also in attendance: Councillors C. Andrews, K. Etheridge, S. Morgan, and J. Pritchard.

RECORDING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live-streamed, and a recording would be made available to view via the Council's website, except for discussions involving confidential or exempt items. [Click Here to View](#).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillors M. Adams and D. Preece.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 4th April 2023

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 4th April 2023 be approved as a correct record and by way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against, and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 4th April 2023 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

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report which outlined the reports planned for the period June 2023 to April 2024 and included all reports that were identified at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Tuesday 4th April 2023. Members were asked to consider the Forward Work Programme, alongside the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, prior to publication on the Council's website.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against, and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 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. NOTICE OF MOTION – DEMOCRACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

Councillor K. Etheridge introduced the report which requested that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee consider the Notice of Motion as set out in paragraph

5.1 of the report and make an appropriate recommendation to Council in accordance with Rule 11(3) of the Constitution.

The Notice of Motion called on the Council to fully engage with all Elected Members and Stakeholders of the County Borough in regard to any changes or amendments to procedures at Scrutiny Committees and Full Council. This was in the interest of openness and transparency of Team Caerphilly and was to be completed prior to any changes in September.

A Member sought clarification on the Notice of Motion, as the decision had been made at a recent Council meeting and was of the understanding that a Notice of Motion could not then be submitted for six months. The Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer advised Members that the Notice of Motion was not seeking to rescind a previous Council decision, which would have been affected by the six-month period referred to by the Member, but that it related to subsequent procedures following the decision of Council. Therefore, Members were advised that the Notice of Motion could be considered.

Councillor K. Etheridge informed Members that he had a petition of 230 names, the majority of which live in the County Borough, who supported the previous Scrutiny Committee set up which consisted of 5 Scrutiny Committees, prior to the decision at Council which reduced these to 3 Scrutiny Committees. Cllr Etheridge noted that under the new system, the number of Councillors able to sit on the Scrutiny Committees will be reduced and noted that both Leaders of Plaid Cymru and the Independent Group had only been given 24 hours' notice of the intention to reduce the number of Scrutiny Committees. Cllr Etheridge also noted that under the new protocol from September, Councillors acting on behalf of someone who does not live in their ward, will be required to notify the relevant Director, Chief Executive and ward Councillors, whilst the Cabinet Members, Mayor and Deputy Mayor are not required to do so.

A Member sought clarification on the consultation process for reducing the number of Scrutiny Committees and noted that a full consultation took place previously when the Scrutiny Committees were increased to 5. It was also noted that no other Authority in Wales is reduced to 3 Scrutiny Committees and there will be a loss of experienced Councillors who would no longer be on a Scrutiny Committee.

Discussion followed regarding the 24 hours' notice referred to by the Members, and it was clarified that the Plaid Cymru and Independent Group Leaders were advised of the content of the report prior to the publication of the agenda pack, containing the relevant report, and not 24 hours before the Council AGM.

A Member sought clarification on the Notice of Motion and the reasons given by the Councillors. Members were advised that the reasons were provided in the report and Members were asked to consider the information stated in the report when making their decision.

A Member noted that the report from Audit Wales which may have instigated the change to the Scrutiny Committees, was 5 years old, and suggested that a more recent review of this report would have been expected.

A Member noted that the number of reports to be considered at each meeting, still needed to be kept to a maximum of 3 or 4 at each meeting to allow for better scrutiny to take place. Another Member noted that some recent scrutiny committee meetings have been cancelled as no reports were scheduled for those meetings.

Following consideration of the Notice of Motion, it was moved and seconded that the Notice of Motion not be supported. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 4 for, 8 against, and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the Notice of Motion not be supported.

8. UPDATE REPORT ON THE COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT FUND.

Cabinet Member Councillor Mrs E. Stenner introduced the report which updated the Committee on the operation of the Community Empowerment Fund since it was approved by Cabinet in July 2021.

The report provided a summary of the delivery of the Community Empowerment Fund following Cabinet approval in July 2021. It detailed the total funding allocated by ward in 2021/22 and 2022/23 and outlined the minor changes to be made for 2023/24. It also highlighted some of the issues experienced in the delivery of the grant scheme and explained the processes for dealing with end of year underspends.

A Member queried the current threshold of £1000 minimum being too high and not relevant to some local community groups as they do not require that level of assistance. The Member proposed whether consideration could be given to reduce the minimum amount to £500 which would encourage more organisations to apply. Members were advised that this will be considered and reviewed, and information would be passed back to Members.

A Member noted thanks to the Cabinet Members for the Community Empowerment Fund, and suggested whether the funds could also be open to Community and Town Councils. Members were advised that Community and Town Councils already have budgets and opportunities to bid for grants.

If Community groups need assistance in completing applications, Members were advised that they should contact GAVO or Caerphilly Cares for additional support.

A Member sought clarification on the £1000 minimum threshold as some details in the report showed that organisations had been awarded much less. Members were advised that the applications would be for the minimum amount of £1000 but where some items are deemed inappropriate for funding, the amount awarded had been reduced.

A Member queried the fund allocation and the period of time within which the funds had to be spent. Members were advised that the Community Empowerment Fund was due to end, but this was changed at the Joint Scrutiny Pre-Budget.

A Member queried whether funding could be 'shared' between wards. Members were advised that this is possible and is already happening in some wards.

A Member noted his support for the minimum threshold for applications to be reduced to £500.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that a proposal be put forward for consideration to reduce the minimum threshold for grant applications from £1000 to £500. By way of verbal communication this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the minimum threshold for grant applications should be reduced from £1000 to £500.

9. MOBILISING TEAM CAERPHILLY.

Cabinet Member Councillor Mrs E. Stenner introduced the report which sought Scrutiny Committee support to access additional external capability from time to time to ensure the successful delivery of the Council's Team Caerphilly Transformation Programme. As part of the 2023/24 Budget Proposals Report approved by Council on 23rd February 2023, Members were made aware of the unprecedented financial pressures that the Council is facing over the coming two financial years.

Members were advised that taking into consideration the high levels of inflation, the current economic outlook, and the range of temporary budget measures proposed for the 2023/24 financial year, the Council will need to identify potential savings of £48.335m for the two-year period 2024/25 to 2025/26.

Following agreement from the Chair the UNISON Branch Secretary for Caerphilly addressed Committee Members. Ms. Dallimore outlined how she was speaking on behalf of the UNISON and GMB trade unions and with the support of the UNITE union. The Branch Secretary advised that the trade unions did not support the report as it currently stands. Members heard how it was the view of the trade unions that the objectives behind appointing external specialists were already being sought as part of the established business transformation programme. Project plans, service reviews, business cases and communication plans had already been put forward internally to address commercialisation and innovation issues. The Branch Secretary also expressed concerns over the baseline assessment scheduled to cost £95,000.

One Member outlined his concern that external specialists could be getting paid for ultimately reaching the same conclusions as Council staff following an internal review on achieving future savings. The Member had concerns over the possibility of outsourcing services to the Private Sector and asked if the approach being put forward had been successful at other Local Authorities.

The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services advised that the baseline assessment review at a previous Local Authority he had worked for had resulted in recurring savings of £1M a year after just one recommendation from the contractor was acted upon. Members heard how this had been achieved without any loss in service or compulsory redundancies. The Director explained that detailed data was provided by the contractor and that this had allowed an informed decision to be made by managers. A similar exercise had also been conducted by 50-60 Local Authorities across the UK.

On the issue of undertaking such work internally it was outlined to Members how an established methodology was not currently in place and that comparative data obtained by the contractor would not be shared. Members heard how in order to identify £50M of savings over a two-year period as per the Medium-Term Financial Plan, expert external assistance was required. The Member asked if discussions were taking place between Council leadership and Welsh Government over the projected settlement. The Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer provided assurances that lobbying took place through all available channels and also advised that the indications were the situation could worsen in the coming years.

During the ensuing discussion on the use of external professionals a member expressed the view that using consultants was not the answer to the challenges faced. Another Member enquired if the external specialists would be given a Project Brief and if so whether or not it would be made available to Scrutiny Members. The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services advised that proposals were in place but at the moment they could not be shared as approval to engage had not been granted. Members also heard how the essence of the proposals were reflected in the latter stages of the report.

A Member questioned giving delegated authority to the Chief Executive to use the Invest to Save Reserve residual balance of £641K in consultation with the Leader, Cabinet Member and Section 151 Officer. Another Member agreed with this view and also observed that Project Briefs should be made available to Scrutiny Members.

One Member outlined how she supported the report because of the benefits from using consultants in terms of gaining a fresh perspective. The Member also highlighted that their final recommendations did not have to be followed if Council took a different view.

The Chair also raised his concerns about giving delegated authority to the Chief Executive and Cabinet for the use of £641K without further Scrutiny. The Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer gave assurances about the stewardship of public money and advised that consultation would take place with Party Leaders and Trade Unions before any final decision was reached. The recommendation had been written to allow greater flexibility.

A Committee Member requested that the external organisation approached be named by Officers so that the qualities they had brought to other organisations could be reviewed. The Head of Customer and Digital Services advised that appointing an external contractor would be subject to procurement regulations and would follow the associated Standing Orders. At the moment the Council was initially engaging with companies prior to the procurement process. Following further discussion, it was agreed that a list of companies the Council was working with would be shared with Scrutiny Members outside of the meeting. The Chair advised that this information would be private and confidential at this stage of the process.

One Member moved that recommendation 3.1 (5) relating to granting delegated authority on the use of the residual balance from the Invest to Save Reserve be removed from the recommendations and put to Scrutiny at a later date when more information was available to Members. Another Member also highlighted the lack of information currently and questioned the ability to call-in a future decision.

The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services outlined that the report, with any amendments agreed by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, would go to Cabinet for approval on the 12th of July. The Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer advised Members that there were limited grounds for calling-in a decision under the Constitution and that final decisions on policy rested with the Cabinet.

The call for recommendation 3.1 (5) to be removed from the report was seconded by a Committee Member and a verbal vote took place. By way of verbal communication this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED to remove the recommendation.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations (with the exception of 3.1 (5) be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 9 for, 4 against, and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the recommendations be approved, subject to the amendment, and RECOMMENDED to Cabinet.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions over the last year and noted this was the last Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

The meeting closed at 7.09 pm.