



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 6TH JUNE 2017 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Pritchard - Chair
Councillor Mrs D. Price - Vice Chair

Councillors:

K. Dawson, K. Etheridge, Mrs C. Forehead, Miss E. Forehead, L. Harding, G. Kirby, C.P. Mann, J. Ridgewell, Mrs M.E. Sargent, R. Saralis, L.G. Whittle

Cabinet Members:

C. Gordon (Corporate Services) and Ms L. Phipps (Homes and Places)

Together with:

N. Scammell (Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer), C. Harrhy (Corporate Director - Communities), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), L. Lucas (Head of Procurement), M. Williams (Interim Head of Property Services), G. Williams (Interim Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), L. Donovan (Acting Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development), M. Lloyd (Deputy Head of Programmes), S. Harris (Interim Head of Corporate Finance), P. Lewis (Acting Head of IT), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), C. Jones (Legal Assistant), H. Morgan (Senior Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M. Adams, Mrs E.M. Aldworth 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 - 28TH FEBRUARY 2017

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 28th February 2017 (minute nos. 1 - 11) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Arising from the minutes, Councillor E. Forehead advised that she had requested a report on the tackling poverty strategy. It was noted that requests for reports will be considered at the workshop scheduled for 28th June 2017 in order that the work programme can be developed.

4. MINUTES - 27TH MARCH 2017

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Special Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 27th March 2017 (minute nos. 1 - 4) 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 received verbal reports from Councillors C. Gordon (Finance, Performance and Governance) and Ms L. Phipps (Homes and Places).

Both made reference to their recent appointment as Cabinet Members and gave an overview of their role. They welcomed the opportunity to work with Members going forward and advised that they would present detailed reports at the next meeting.

7. POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Interim Head of Democratic Services presented the report, which outlined details of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP).

Members were advised that the FWP includes all reports agreed at the meeting held on 28th February 2017 and outlines the reports planned for the period June 2017 to October 2017. They were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet Work Programme as appended to the report and to suggest any changes.

It was noted that requests for reports will be considered at the workshop scheduled for 28th June 2017 in order that a work programme can be developed. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it was requested that an update be provided on the development of the broadband programme and external WHQS works. With regards to the latter it was noted that this would be included in the report scheduled to be presented to the next meeting (Housing Service Year End Performance).

During the course of the meeting, it was agreed that the report on the review of housing service charges be deferred to the next meeting in order that it can be considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

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. REVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICE CHARGES

It was agreed that the report be deferred to the next meeting in order that it can be considered by the Caerphilly Homes Task Group.

10. YEAR END PERFORMANCE REPORT FOR CORPORATE SERVICES 2016/17

The Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer presented the report, which provided Members with a performance update of the Corporate Services Directorate. The report reviewed performance against objectives, highlighted the exceptions, set out key objectives/priorities for the next twelve months and identified areas for improvement.

Details of performance against each service area within Corporate Services, together with future challenges and areas of improvements for the year ahead, were summarised, with full details included within the report. Members were advised that during 2016/17 there was evidence of excellent performance but that areas of poorer performance had also been identified. It was noted that 2017/18 will continue to be driven by the need to deliver better services with less resources, but against the backdrop of the Local Government Reform Agenda.

It was reported that effective financial planning and robust budget monitoring arrangements have helped the Authority to manage its financial affairs. The trend of delivering balanced budgets and identifying savings in advance of need continues. This is becoming far more challenging as the programme of austerity continues and requires further significant savings to be delivered. In addition to savings of £9.046m already approved for 2017/18, it is anticipated that the Authority will need to find further savings totalling £28.8m for the period 2018/19 to 2020/21.

As in the past, the delivery of approved savings will be closely monitored and due to the financial position becoming ever more challenging, the need for accurate and reliable budget monitoring information will be greater than ever. In addition to these demands there is a need to ensure that core financial functions are delivered and that statutory deadlines are met.

Specific attention was drawn to the sickness absence data for Corporate Services and it was noted that a HR Assistant has been recruited into the Managing Attendance Team to support the Managing Sickness Absence Policy. In order to ensure that policies and procedures are being adhered to (and there is a consistent recording of data), HR continue to monitor the policy and the way in which sickness absence is recorded to ensure a consistency of approach.

Members were pleased to note that the results of the benchmarking exercise undertaken by CIPFA in respect of the cost of administration for functions in Corporate Services have shown that Caerphilly is the 3rd lowest of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

During the course of the debate, reference was made to the overall sickness absence for Property Services, the merging of the roles of the retired Head of Services and Building Consultancy Manager, the welfare of the staff and to the fact that the Interim Head of Service is now conducting all return to work interviews, which would normally be undertaken by the line manager.

The Interim Head of Property Services advised that he has not taken on all of the duties associated with the former Head of Service. Whilst the delivery of the current range of services has become progressively more challenging, the Property Services Team (which is currently split over two floors) will be co-located on the first floor and this will enable closer working relationships and greater resource flexibility. He accepted that personnel issues can tie up management time, add to the sickness absence figures and increase the workload of colleagues and confirmed that improving the current situation and taking steps to reduce future incidents is a key objective going forward. By conducting return to work interviews, it will be possible to pick up on stress related issues at an early stage and understand its cause and how it can be addressed. He confirmed that this will be kept under review to ensure it can be delivered.

Reference was then made to the number of housing benefit interventions completed per annum as a percentage of total caseload. The Interim Head of Corporate Finance explained that should there be a change of circumstances, the applicant should notify Officers to enable a reassessment to determine whether they are still entitled to housing benefit.

In noting that 97.1% percentage of total council tax due for the financial year had been received by the authority, it was requested that future reports provide comparable data on both the Welsh and national average. It was agreed that this would be provided where available.

A query was then raised in relation to the sale of Pontllanfraith House and the demolition of both Oakdale and Pontllanfraith comprehensive schools. The Interim Head of Property Services advised that Property Services lead the delivery of the Council's asset rationalisation programme and completion of the sales of Pontllanfraith House and Dyffryn House and the demolition and sale of the Oakdale and Pontllanfraith Comprehensive School sites are priorities. The sale of the Pontllanfraith House site has progressed and a preferred bidder has been appointed, with the contract due for completion by the end of the year. There has been interest in Duffryn House and an update had been requested from the parent company.

With regards to Pontllanfraith comprehensive school, the building is still in use until the end of June and surveys will be undertaken prior to its demolition in late autumn. It was confirmed that it is only the building that will be demolished as it is intended to use the lower part of the site for Social Services purposes. The demolition of Oakdale is also due in the autumn. Following a query in relation to the retention of the multi-use games area (MUGA) at that location, Mr Williams advised that he did not believe that the facility was included in the demolition contract but that he would make enquiries and advise Members accordingly. A query was also raised in relation to the retention of the community centre/youth club building. Mr Williams thought that it is to be retained for the time being until an alternative venue can be identified but would make enquiries. It was confirmed that the Music Service that use the Pontllanfraith site will be found alternative accommodation.

In that Pontllanfraith House site borders sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) a query was raised as to how this will be managed as part of the development of the site. It was explained that a design brief had been sent to potential developers. Any development will require planning approval and the planning process will consider, comment on and approve or reject the proposed approach to ecological and sustainability matters.

It was confirmed that Cwmcarn high school is still in use but will be vacated in October 2018. There are ongoing discussions on the covenants on the site.

With regards to Procurement Services, a Member sought details of the small lots exemption threshold and the Head of Procurement was advised of the exemption under the Public Procurement Regulations to support local providers in the delivery of the WHQS programme. Originally, 20% of the WHQS works were retained for local contractors but in view of the amount of work required and the limited number of contractors, the radius has been extended.

Reference was made to the future challenges/areas that need improvement or that did not go well and to the comments made that the decision to include non-core community benefits needs to be based on a more pragmatic assessment of what is realistic and achievable. It was accepted that in making the decision to include these, a more robust effort needs to be made to ensure that suppliers are delivering in accordance with the community benefits plan submitted by the awarded supplier at tender stage. It was explained that there are occasions whereby the contract is not able to achieve the required aims and there is a requirement to look at the value, length and content in its totality.

In noting that sickness absence within the service remains above Directorate averages, it was requested that a report be presented on a whole authority basis (including costs, management, monitoring, referral procedures, occupational health referrals, phased returns). This request would be considered at the workshop scheduled for 28th June 2017. Mrs Scammell reminded Members that the effective management of sickness absence remains a key priority and that certain of the data in relation to days lost is reflected in the Annual Performance Report that is presented to Council. There is a dedicated HR Portal which details procedures for managing sickness absence through the HR Strategy with guidance as to how they should be used and the recent appointment of a Monitoring Compliance Manager will assist with the process.

With regards to the management of the redeployment pool it was noted that more posts have been advertised on a fixed term basis rather than a full time basis. The Acting Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development advised that this is to cater for the review of service provision and there are instances whereby an employee is in a fixed term post and may have a permanent substantive post.

In noting the content of the report, Members thanked the Officers for the level of detail provided and for responding to the queries raised during the course of the debate.

The meeting closed at 6.25pm .

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 18th July 2017, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR