



COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 13TH JULY 2021 AT 5.00PM

PRESENT:

Councillor C. Andrews - Mayor
Councillor J. Gale - Deputy Mayor

Councillors:

M. Adams, E.M. Aldworth, A. Angel, J. Bevan, P. Bevan, C. Bezzina, C. Bishop, A. Collis, S. Cook, D. Cushing, C. Cuss, W. David, D.T. Davies, K. Dawson, N. Dix, K. Etheridge, M. Evans, C. Forehead, E. Forehead, J. Fussell, A. Gair, N. George, C. Gordon, R. Gough, L. Harding, D. Havard, A. Higgs, A. Hussey, M. James, V. James, G. Johnston, G. Kirby, A. Leonard, C. Mann, P. Marsden, B. Miles, S. Morgan, B. Owen, T. Parry, L. Phipps, D.W.R. Preece, J. Pritchard, J. Ridgewell, J. Roberts, R. Saralis, G. Simmonds, J. Simmonds, E. Stenner, J. Taylor, C. Thomas, A. Whitcombe, R. Whiting, L. Whittle, T.J. Williams, W. Williams, B. Zaplatynski

Together with:-

C. Harray (Chief Executive), M.S. Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment), D. Street (Corporate Director Social Services), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director Education and Corporate Services), R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and Section 151 Officer)

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chief Executive reminded those present that the meeting was being filmed but would not be live streamed, however a recording would be available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). She advised that decisions would be made by Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C. Elsbury, C. Gordon, D. Hardacre, D. Harse, S. Kent, P. Leonard, G. Oliver, D. Price, M.E. Sargent and J. Scriven

2. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Mayor referred to the many events and visits that she has undertaken since the last meeting including her presentation of a short citation at a socially distanced event to celebrate Armed Forces Day and a socially distanced event at Lake Side View Café for the installation of a defibrillator at Park Cwm Darran. The Mayor referenced her recent fund-raising trip to Zip World that raised over £600 for the Mayor's Charity, she placed on record her thanks to all those that made donations.

The Mayor advised that she had approved a change of agenda order at this evenings meeting, and that Agenda Item No. 13 would be taken ahead of Agenda Item No. 12.

3. TO RECEIVE PETITIONS UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 28(3)

There were no petitions presented.

4. PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

There were no awards presented.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

6. MINUTES – ANNUAL COUNCIL 13TH MAY 2021

RESOLVED that the following minutes be approved as correct records and signed by the Mayor.

Annual Council held on 13th May 2021 (minute nos. 1-14)

7. MINUTES – COUNCIL 1ST JUNE 2021

RESOLVED that the following minutes be approved as correct records and signed by the Mayor.

Council held on 1st June 2021 (minute nos. 1-12)

8. TO RECEIVE AND TO ANSWER QUESTIONS RECEIVED UNDER RULE OF PROCEDURE 10(4)

Question from Councillor Kevin Etheridge to Councillor James Pritchard, Deputy Leader.

To ask the Deputy Leader to define in relation to this portfolio what measures he will introduce to engage positively with stakeholders, communities, businesses, opposition Councillors and Traders within all our Town Centres to ensure consistency across the County Borough as Town Centre Management Groups have not been meeting for 2 years?

Response from the Deputy Leader to Councillor Kevin Etheridge.

We all know that our town centres had been severely impacted by the Covid Pandemic. We also know that we have supported our businesses financially, with the payment of millions of pounds of business grants and also, we have been there to provide guidance and advice to business via our business support team. We have discussed previously in this Chamber, the Town Centre Management Groups and how, like a handful of other services, have ceased throughout the pandemic in order to provide the capacity across the organisation to deliver the many additional services we have introduced in direct response to the needs of our communities throughout the pandemic.

A commitment has also been given to Members, from the former Deputy Leader that these Town Centre Groups will shortly be re-introduced as we begin to develop a post Covid plan for our Town Centres. I therefore wish to reiterate the position already set out that the Town Centre Groups will shortly be re-introduced and Ward Members will be advised in due course of the exact timing of these meetings, so they can contribute as they see fit.

Clearly, we can't shape the future of our town centres alone and we will want to engage with local businesses and wider stakeholders. We are currently developing these plans and these will be fully outlined in a report to Cabinet shortly, which will be available to all Members in early September.

I am aware that the Leader will be making a statement later in this meeting, which will provide further detail regarding our plans to develop our Town Centres post Covid.

I have worked constantly with businesses and traders with the support of the Cabinet Member to get grants out to those business particularly through COVID and as Deputy Leader my duty will be to support the Leader and Cabinet Members with further engagements with our private sector businesses. I am active on social media and have joined some local groups to reach out to residents across the county. My role as Deputy Leader is to engage with residents in the most constructive way possible. In the short time I've been in post, I've engaged with some of our Councillors regarding proposals within my portfolio and I'm keen to ask locally elected members for their views, as they know their community. I have an open-door policy, so if I don't get in touch with individual councillors first, please feel free to get in touch with me.

Thank you for your question Councillor Etheridge.

9. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader presented her statement and shared the news that the Chief Executive Christina Harry had been shortlisted in the category of 'Chief Executive of the Year' in the prestigious MJ Achievement Awards 2021. In addition, the amazing Catering Team had also been shortlisted in the category of 'Best Council Service'. The Leader congratulated the nominees for this outstanding achievement and advised Council that the awards would be made in September 2021 and she would keep everyone posted about the outcome.

The Leader then gave clarification regarding the portfolio remit of the Deputy Leader. Members were referred to an update recently circulated that set out the scope of the Deputy Leader's portfolio and the wider Cabinet. The Deputy Leader portfolio was described as Highways, Transportation, Towns and Property.

Members were advised that there is a significant regeneration work programme coming forward which included, town centre regeneration and assurances were given that the town centres were of pivotal importance. The Leader recognised that town centres had been greatly impacted by the pandemic however, working with Traders, Members and other Key Partners, the authority would be looking at reshaping town centres as part of the Covid Recovery Plan to ensure that they are vibrant and sustainable over the longer term. Members were advised that the Cabinet would be receiving a progress report against the Covid Recovery Plan on the 1st September 2021 to consider the progress that has already been made as well as future planning. Additionally, it had been recognised that Town Centre meetings would need to change moving forward in a Post Covid environment. Therefore, a separate report would be presented to Scrutiny for consideration prior to a Cabinet decision over the forthcoming months.

The Leader then confirmed that Town Centre Regeneration sits within the Regeneration Portfolio with Councillor Eluned Stenner, who is responsible for Regeneration and Economic

Development and the model for town centre engagement will be a key priority that Councillor Stenner will lead.

The Deputy Leader portfolio was confirmed as Highways, Transportation and Property, and Members were advised that Cabinet worked across respective portfolios to ensure the delivery of the Corporate Plan priorities and this will remain the position going forward.

Council were advised that it would take some time to define the new role for our town centres, and it was important that the current policy position flexes to accommodate any such changes. The role of town centres will be multi-faceted, offering opportunities for agile working hubs, business start-up accommodation, affordable and adaptable homes as well as local retail opportunities. One such policy position that will need to be re-considered alongside the development of town centres for the future was confirmed as car parking charges.

The Leader confirmed that this Council had offered free parking since the start of the pandemic last year and referenced the recent Cabinet decision to defer car park charges until September where a further report would be considered at this point. Council was advised that this report was scheduled to be considered on 1st September and given the current Covid position, the Cabinet was minded to extend the current free parking arrangements for a further period.

Members were advised that the longer-term decision regarding car parking charges must be considered as an integral part of a wider town centre review, working closely with the business community, as part of the Covid Recovery Plans. Therefore, the Cabinet is also minded to recommend at its meeting of 1st September, that the Car Parking Task and Finish Group reconvenes to consider this matter in detail and make recommendations to the Scrutiny prior to a further report being presented to Cabinet next year. The role of the Town Centre Management Groups would be a crucial part of this data gathering.

The Leader emphasised that this related to town centre car park charging only. Members were reminded that Cabinet had already agreed that car park charges would be reintroduced at the strategic tourism destination, Cwmcarn Forest Drive, however free parking at country parks would continue.

The Leader took this opportunity to reassure businesses, residents, and visitors alike that this Council would continue to do everything we could to support the local economy as we emerge from one of the most difficult periods in living memory.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

10. NOTICE OF MOTION – MEMORIAL BENCHES

Consideration was given to the notice of motion by Councillors J. Roberts and C. Elsbury and supported by Councillors A. Farina-Childs, B. Owen, C. Mann, and T. Parry.

It was noted that the Notice of Motion had been considered by the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 22nd June 202, where, by a majority vote Members recommended to Council that the motion not be supported.

Councillor Roberts confirmed the notice of motion and the provided background information as to why he was bringing the motion forward at this time.

The Chair of the Environment and Sustainability Committee provided details of the Scrutiny Committee discussions and the reason that its Members had not supported the motion were confirmed.

Clarification was sought as to whether there could be a case made for a more flexible approach regarding the siting of benches to enable bereaved families to position them, at their own expense, closer to their loved one's graves. The Member felt that the current blanket ban on provision was unfair to families. Officers advised that the policy under discussion had been implemented following an extensive period of consultation including the establishment of a Task and Finish Group, which completed a comprehensive service inquiry. It was noted that in terms of placement, operational factors needed to be taken into consideration so that cemetery works could be undertaken safely, and this policy approach ensured this. Members were asked to note that there was not a blanket ban on the provision of benches, benches were still being installed but their positioning was determined operationally to ensure that a cemetery did not become saturated and works could be undertaken safely and with the minimum of disruption. Should a family wish to do so they could place a memorial plaque on an existing bench or plant a tree in memory of their loved one.

Following consideration and discussion it was moved and seconded that the Notice of Motion be supported by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation and in noting there were 21 For, 38 Against and 1 Abstention the Motion was declared lost.

RESOLVED that the Notice of Motion not be supported.

11. NOTICE OF MOTION – PLEDGE TO BE SEEN CAMPAIGN

Consideration was given to the notice of motion by Councillor P. Marsden and it was noted that the Mayor had allowed the motion to be dealt with at Council, without being first discussed at an overview and scrutiny committee in order to expediate business. The motion was supported by Councillors E. Stenner, S. Cook, N. George, C. Gordon, R. Whiting and A. Whitcombe.

Councillor Marsden confirmed the notice of motion and the reasons for bringing it forward. It was noted that Caerphilly County Borough Council would join Welsh Government in signing up to the Pledge to be Seen Campaign that would ensure that people with visible difference such as a scar, mark or condition that affects their appearance, are seen and heard across mainstream culture and in the workplace.

Following consideration and discussion it was moved and seconded that the Notice of Motion be supported and by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation and in noting there were 61 For, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the notice of motion be supported.

13. DIVERSITY IN DEMOCRACY

With the approval of the Mayor this item was brought forward on the agenda.

Consideration was given to the report that advised Council of the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Diversity in Democracy report and sought Council's endorsement of the Diverse Council declaration in support of the WLGA Diversity in Democracy programme. Members were asked to note that the Democratic Services Committee would be developing an Action Plan of activity ahead of the 2022 elections.

Members were asked to note that the WLGA decided to try and advance gender equality and diversity across Council's in Wales in advance of the May 2022 elections, with the ambitious aims to ensure that Council chambers across Wales are more representatives of their communities. The recommendations within the report would provide a clear and public commitment to improving diversity, demonstrate an open and welcoming culture to all. Consideration would be given to staggering council meetings times and agreeing recess periods to support Councillors with other commitments and would also set out an action plan of activity ahead of local elections.

The importance of mitigating against barriers to enable people to attend meetings more easily was emphasised. Members expressed their support for the principle outlined in the report and discussed the need to also consider the economic impact that standing for election could have and referenced the parachute payment offered to Senedd Members and Members of Parliament and the introduction of this at a County Borough level could assist. Members debated the financial implication of standing for election and welcomed the inclusion of Councillors in the Local Government Pension Scheme but felt that more measures needed to be put in place to make the Councillor role more attractive to a broader range of the community.

Members were advised that the WLGA had already debated around the topic of what could be done to assist those with caring responsibility, or those giving up employment to serve their communities. Members agreed that the Independent Remuneration Panel would need to take these issues under consideration as part of their next review.

Following consideration and discussion it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained within the Officer's report be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation and in noting there were 60 For, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that: -

1. The progress and actions outlined in the WLGA Council report as attached at Appendix 1 be noted.
2. The Diverse Council declaration to formally declare that Council will provide a clear, public commitment to improving diversity, demonstrate an open and welcoming culture to all, consider staggering council meeting times and agreeing recess periods to support councillors with other commitments and set out an action plan of activity ahead of the 2022 local elections be endorsed.
3. The Democratic Services Committee will build on the Council's commitment and set out an action plan with progress updates being brought back to Council be agreed.

12. PROVISIONAL REVENUE BUDGET OUTTURN FOR 2020-21

With the approval of the Mayor this item had been put back on the agenda.

Consideration was given to the report which had previously been considered by Cabinet on the 7th July 2021 and Members were advised that the recommendations in paragraphs 3.1.1 to 3.1.6 were unanimously agreed at that meeting.

The report provided an overview of the Council's performance against the revenue budget for the 2020/21 financial year and included proposals for the use of surplus General Fund balances and use of service reserves for a range of one-off purposes.

It was noted that the Authority had incurred significant additional costs due to the pandemic and had also lost income in several key areas. Welsh Government (WG) had provided substantial funding to Local Authorities to offset additional costs and income losses through the Covid-19 Hardship Fund, with the total funding allocated to Caerphilly CBC during the 2020/21 financial year being £24.2m.

Members were referred to Appendix A of the report which provided a summary of the provisional outturn position and showed a net underspend of £38.517m across all services. It was noted that an underspend of £10.070m is reported for schools and consequently school balances have increased from £1.3m to £11.3m. This underspend was greater than projected due to the receipt of additional grant funding from Welsh Government in the latter part of the financial year. This funding totalled circa £5m and supported expenditure that the schools had originally anticipated funding themselves.

It was noted that there is an underspend of £10.018m for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and that the majority of this is due to Covid-19. This underspend has been carried forward into the 2021/22 financial year to support the completion of the WHQS Programme.

It was also noted that the level of underspend on Service Directorate Budgets and Miscellaneous Finance is significantly higher than in previous years and that this reflects the unprecedented impact of Covid-19 on changes in working practices, along with the scale of one-off financial support provided.

It was explained that the financial support provided by Welsh Government had been vital to maintain financial resilience during the pandemic but further financial support from the Covid-19 Hardship Fund is currently only confirmed until the end of September 2021. This presents a significant financial risk and the position will need to be closely monitored throughout the 2021/22 financial year.

The medium-term financial outlook remains challenging and the Cabinet Member reminded Members that the 2021/22 Budget Report presented to Council on the 24th February 2021 included an updated Medium-Term Financial Plan showing a potential savings requirement of £21.1m for the four-year period 2022/23 to 2025/26. However, the underspend for 2020/21 did present an opportunity for significant one-off investments to support the Council in the delivery of its key priorities, the recovery phase of the pandemic, and the ongoing delivery of the transformation programme.

Members noted the recommendations approved by Cabinet and that decisions in respect of the General Fund Reserves were a matter for Council.

Members welcomed the investment opportunities outlined within the report and particular reference was made to the proposals for Community Connectors, Cleaning and Greening and Apprenticeships.

Clarification was sought in relation to digital transformation and what would be different because of the proposed investment. Officers confirmed that IT resources would allow the Council to move forward more efficiently and effectively. Reference was made to the enormous technological shift that occurred because of the pandemic, for example 10,000 additional devices had been added into existing systems. The proposals would allow the Council to more effectively move forward and would be of particular importance to schools which required additional support as the EdTech programme moved into its next phase of investment. The demands on the ICT Support Team would be enormous during this period.

Reference was then made to the Local Development Plan and the money invested in its production and whether this provided value for money. Officers confirmed the number of staff in the LDP Team and that the production of an LDP was a Welsh Government Legislation requirement.

Clarification was sought as to whether the underspend position was being mirrored across other Local Authorities, and the Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer advised that the Society for Welsh Treasurers was currently summarising the position across all Welsh Local Authorities and that this would be shared in due course. However, following conversations with colleagues across the Gwent Region, the Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer confirmed that higher than usual underspends were being reported.

The Head of Financial Services & S151 Officer confirmed that despite the significant challenges presented by the pandemic the Council's financial position had been well managed. However, a prudent approach was still required as there was still a requirement for significant savings moving forward.

Reference was made to the Hardship Fund, Transformation Strategy and the additional funding for fixed term posts detailed within the report and clarification was sought as to the role of Community Coordinators. Officers confirmed that the Hardship Fund was not scheduled to continue beyond September 2021, although representations were being made to Welsh Government on this. The additional fixed term posts would be used to provide additional ICT support for schools, and Community Coordinators would provide valuable links between residents and key stakeholders. The fixed term nature of these posts would be a tool to establish a proof of concept for the initiative.

Members debated the use of reserves and it was noted that reports on reserves were regularly presented to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee where Members could scrutinise in detail levels and uses.

Following consideration and discussion it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained in the report be approved.

RESOLVED that: -

1. The recommendation of the Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer to maintain the General Fund balance at £11.047m, representing 3% of the 2021/22 net revenue budget be approved.
2. The proposed use of surplus General Fund balances totalling £9.215m as detailed in Section 5.9 of the attached report be approved.

14. YOUTH SERVICE REMOVAL FROM LEASE AND USE OF CRUMLIN INSTITUTE

Consideration was given to the report which had been considered as an urgent item by Cabinet on the 9th June 2021.

The constitution requires that any decision taken as a matter of urgency must be reported to the next available meeting of Council, giving the reason for its urgency. Therefore, the report is presented to Council for Members' information.

Members noted the reasons for the urgency and the decision taken by Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 18:30pm

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 5th October 2021 they were signed by the Mayor.

MAYOR