



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE DIGITAL MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY,
22ND FEBRUARY 2022 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor G. Kirby – Chair
Councillor B. Miles – Vice Chair

Councillors:

M. Adams, Mrs E. M. Aldworth, C. Cuss, L. Harding, G. Johnston, C. P. Mann, Mrs. M.E. Sargent, and L. G. Whittle.

Cabinet Members:

Councilor C. Gordon (Corporate Services) and Councilor Mrs. E. Stenner (Performance, Economy and Enterprise).

Together with:

S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), L. Donovan (Head of People Services), S. Richards (Head of Education Planning and Strategy), K. Peters (Corporate Policy Manager), A. Cullinane (Senior Policy Officer – Equalities, Welsh Language and Consultation), J. Pearce (Business Improvement Officer), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer) and J. Lloyd (Committee Services Officer).

Also in attendance: Councillor. J. Pritchard.

RECORDING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being recorded and 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 for absence were received from Councillors Mrs C. Forehead, Miss E. Forehead, S. Morgan, R. Saralis, G. Simmonds and J. Taylor.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 20TH JANUARY 2022

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 20th January 2022 be approved as a correct record and by way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 7 for, 0 against and 2 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 20th January 2022 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 February 2022 to March 2022 and included all reports that were identified at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Thursday 20th January 2022. 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 10 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

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. DIRECTORATE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT SIX MONTH UPDATE 2021/22

Councillor Mrs. E. Stenner, Cabinet Member for Performance, Economy and Enterprise, introduced the report which presented the Scrutiny Committee with the 6-month Corporate Services Performance Assessment. Members were advised that the Performance Assessment is the Directorate's self-assessment and forms part of the Council's overall self-assessment activity. The report provided information and analysis for the 6-month period from April – September 2021.

The Head of Education Planning and Strategy advised Members that the Directorate Performance Assessment (DPA) sets out the six strategic objectives for this financial year which comprise of:

- Leading & supporting the organisation's TeamCaerphilly Transformation Programme
- Continuing to refine the Council's Governance Arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and compliant with legislative requirements
- Developing and refreshing employee working practices that support the TeamCaerphilly ethos and the emerging organisational culture
- Supporting the implementation of modern, fit for purpose approaches to decision-making and local democracy
- Developing an IT environment that is secure, drives transformation and enables efficient service delivery
- Maximising the Council's financial position

Members were referred to the progress made against the objectives and were advised that this progress had been made 'despite the pandemic response' and the efforts of staff had been incredible.

Members were also referred to the Key Performance information of the DPA for their consideration, and current challenges to meet FOI targets. Members were advised that two additional FOI officers were being sought to assist in this area.

Members' attention was drawn to resources, including the challenges presented by Covid, in relation to sickness absence and the associated self-isolation, and that many services had remained ongoing despite of the challenges faced by staff.

Members were referred to the projected underspend as of September 2021, much of which has been because of additional grant funding in addition to challenges in recruitment and spending. Members were asked to note that this underspend was proposed to be reinvested into some additional capacity across Corporate Services, and that further details of the proposed investments would follow in the 'Whole-Authority Revenue Budget Monitoring Report (Month 9) included in the agenda of the meeting.

Members were asked to note that a report was due to be put before the Committee in a future meeting, in relation to recruitment challenges and proposals to overcome them.

A Member queried whether the staff shortage in People Services was due to the team being under-staffed, sickness absence, covid related absences or something else. Members were advised that there were no absence issues in People Services, however the authority had been affected by increases in sickness absence due to the omicron variant and vaccinations. Staff have also been affected by the NHS delays in operations and ongoing treatments.

Members were advised of the ongoing issue of recruitment and retention of staff and a report is due to come before this Committee next month to provide information on the challenges and determine the proposals to overcome them.

Staff well-being was discussed in relation to the current home working arrangements. Members were advised that Managers should be having regular 121 meetings with their staff, monitoring their workload, hours worked and their well-being. Staff who had experienced difficulties working from home throughout the pandemic had been allowed to attend the offices, subject to risk assessments and Managers' approval.

A Member sought clarification on targets not being met in relation to Freedom of Information requests and Subject Access Requests. Members were advised that an additional 2 staff were being appointed to assist in these areas and further information would be sought for Members, as to what measures are currently in place, to provide an update on improving responses to FOI requests and SAR's.

A Member sought clarification on safeguarding of jobs and funding for recruitment in certain areas. Members were advised that there are many staff in fixed term posts due to funding and this is currently being looked at to ensure these staff members are given job security.

A Member referred to discussions that have taken place over the last two years in relation to staff retention and recruitment and noted that sickness levels should not be increasing if staff were mainly working from home and questioned whether an agile working policy would benefit the staff sickness level. Members were advised that not all staff are able to work from home and neither do they work in an office. Members were referred to the well-being strategy and support given to staff in relation to 121 meetings with Managers and ability to attend the offices when required. Members were advised that the Head of People Services would contact the Cabinet Member in relation to a future report on staff sickness/absence for a more detailed report on reasons for sickness absence. Members expressed an interest on well-being measures and a strategy for returning home workers to council buildings within this future report.

Discussion followed in relation to sickness absence levels and stress related sickness for those staff who were working from home, and how Caerphilly levels related to other local authorities. Members were advised that the full information in relation to other authorities would not be available until after March 2022. Members were advised that stress was the highest reason for sickness absence in the authority but noted that it was not work related but personal. The Cabinet Member referred to the pandemic over the last 2 years and had met with staff from various areas in the authority. Staff surveys had also been completed, with many staff confirming that they would wish to work both at home and in the office during the working week.

Following consideration of the item, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee discussed, challenged, and scrutinised the information contained within and noted the contents of the report.

8. STRATEGIC EQUALITY PLAN ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

The Cabinet Member for Performance, Economy and Enterprise presented the report, which informed Members of the progress made during the financial year 2020-2021 against actions in the Council's current Strategic Equality Plan 2020-2024, and to provide any comment prior to Cabinet approval and publication on the Council's website.

Members were advised that the Council has a statutory duty to produce an annual report on equalities issues under current legislation. The requirements are very detailed as to what relevant information must be included in the annual report. The amount of information presented is therefore to ensure that the regulatory body involved (the Equality and Human Rights Commission) are provided with full evidence of the Council's compliance and commitment to those statutory duties.

A Member queried the Gender Pay Gap which had been attributed to societal issues in the report and asked about opportunities for part-time working. The Head of People Services

advised that because of caring responsibilities many employees took advantage of the Council's flexible working policy and chose to work on a part-time basis. Members heard how a robust pay grade structure ensured that males and females received the same pay grade for carrying out the same job titles and that a Gender Pay Gap statement would be published at the end of March with any issues raised being considered at a corporate level. The Committee Chair and the Member requested further clarification on part-time opportunities for senior roles within the Council. The Head of People Services advised Members that all posts are offered on variable contracts but that service needs had to be considered. It was highlighted that the opportunity to compress or reduce hours was available for some senior positions within the Council and that flexible working policies allowed all staff to request different working patterns.

The Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee provided comments on the report prior to Cabinet approval and publication on the Council's website.

9. WHOLE AUTHORITY REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT (MONTH 9)

The Cabinet Member for Performance, Economy and Enterprise presented the report, which provided details to Members of projected whole-authority revenue budget expenditure for the 2021/22 financial year and sought Members' endorsement of proposals for the ringfencing of underspends for a range of specific purposes prior to consideration by Cabinet.

Members were provided with details of the 2021/22 projected revenue budget outturn position based on information available as at month 9 of the current financial year. Members were also referred to the proposals included for the ring-fencing of underspends for a range of specific purposes and were asked to consider these prior to the proposals being presented to Cabinet on 23rd February 2022.

Members were also advised of the announcement by Welsh Government this week in relation to further funding of £50m for the local government financial settlement across Wales for the current financial year 2021/22. Members were also advised that it is anticipated that Caerphilly County Borough Council will receive around £2.9m.

A Member sought clarification on underspends and proposals included in the report in relation to Education, and whether more funding was needed for additional staff to cover issues raised by Covid over the past 2 years, instead of the proposals for 21st Century Schools. Members were advised that investment was being proposed for several fixed term posts within Education and the Member was advised to contact the Chief Education Officer with their specific concerns regarding education attainment. Discussion followed noting that there were no Officers from Education in the meeting to respond to Members' questions, whilst the Chair advised Members that the meeting was regarding the finance aspects and that this meeting was not the Education Scrutiny Committee. Members were advised that a further report will be going to Cabinet when final underspend figures are confirmed and referred Members to the additional funding in recent years to education and vulnerable learners. Members were also advised that the EOTAS (Education other than at school) strategy was presented to the Education Scrutiny Committee a few months ago, in relation to learners who are not being educated in mainstream schools. The strategy looks at each individual learner and determines the best education provision for them. Members were also advised that the 21st Century Schools proposals included centres for vulnerable learners in Pontllanfraith, Glanynant Learning Centre and Virginia Park in Caerphilly.

A Member raised concerns about the increase in numbers of children being educated at home and whether there is any financial incentive for doing so. Members were advised that home schooling was allowed and is monitored by the local authority for those who wish to do so, to

make sure there is adequate provision for each specific case. A Member also raised concerns about the education of all children during the pandemic and noted they could all have been classed as vulnerable. Clarification was sought on the 'catch up' areas required in relation to the shortage of teachers during the pandemic. Members were advised that Welsh Government grant funding had provided significant investment to schools for their 'catch up' programmes.

A Member sought clarification on the underspend in Social Services and noted this was likely to have been caused by the recent grant funding from Welsh Government and the current closure of day centres. Members were advised that the underspend was mainly in relation to the very recent grant funding and that 50% of the underspend will be held back for spending on social care in the future.

Having noted the content of the report, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendation be forwarded to Cabinet for approval. By way of Microsoft Forms (and in noting there were 8 for, 0 against and 1 abstention) this was agreed by the majority present.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet:

3.1.2 Endorse the proposed ring-fencing of underspends totalling £2.535m as detailed in Appendix 2 of the report.

10. UPDATE ON RESERVES

The Cabinet Member for Performance, Economy and Enterprise introduced the report and advised Members that the report provided details of the usable reserves held by the Authority. Details were provided of the audited balances as at the 1st April 2021 along with updated balances reflecting in-year adjustments actioned to date for the 2021/22 financial year. Members were asked to note the contents of the report. Members were also advised that this is an annual report providing details of the usable reserves and their intended purpose.

A Member sought clarification on the substantial amount in reserves and noted the increase in the last 3 years. Members were advised that reserves are required for unforeseen circumstances and are kept and used accordingly, with reference made to the recent storms, capital projects, social care, and funding for schools. Members were also referred to the 7 highest value funds held by the Authority and the planned spends in the near future. Members were invited to contact the Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer, outside of the meeting, if they wished to discuss any specific concerns regarding reserves. Discussion followed as to the high level of reserves held by Caerphilly County Borough Council, compared to other Local Authorities in Wales. Members were advised that Caerphilly County Borough Council is the 5th highest spending local authority in Wales and were asked to note that not all local authorities are the same and should not be compared in relation to reserves held.

A Member queried that there appeared to be 2 separate amounts within the report, allocated for the same purpose (post 16 review). Members were advised that these 2 amounts were in relation to the same review but had been separate amounts agreed at different times.

A Member noted that the reserves strategy was last reviewed in July 2016. Members were advised this was correct, however, a review of the reserve's strategy would be undertaken in due course.

A Member queried the level of reserves held by the authority and noted that Caerphilly County Borough Council was one of the most deprived councils in Wales. Whilst acknowledging that some levels of reserves are required, a member noted that spending should be used to

promote better paid jobs within Caerphilly which would equate to a better standard of living. It was suggested that a review of the reserve's strategy should include an increase in well paid jobs which would assist those residents who had to travel outside of the Borough to seek better paid employment. Members were reminded that £3.5m had gone to the Regeneration Board in recent years and this had included investment into the County Borough, which had created jobs.

The Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report.

The meeting closed at 7.01 pm.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 12th July 2022, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR