



CABINET

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY 14TH DECEMBER 2022 AT 1PM

PRESENT:

Councillor S. Morgan – Chair

Councillors:

J. Pritchard (Cabinet Member for Prosperity, Regeneration and Climate Change), C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities), S. Cook (Cabinet Member for Housing), N. George (Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Property), P. Leonard (Cabinet Member for Planning and Public Protection), C. Morgan (Cabinet Member for Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces), Cllr. J. Simmonds (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation) and E. Stenner (Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance).

Also Present:

Councillor G. Johnston (Chair Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee)

Together with:

C. Harry (Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director Education and Corporate Services), D. Street (Corporate Director Social Services and Housing), M.S. Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment).

Also in Attendance:

L. Donovan (Head of People Services), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer), N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), M. Jennings (Principal Housing Strategy Officer), L. Allen (Principal Group Accountant, Housing), S. O'Donnell (Principal Council Tax and NNDR Officer), C. Campbell (Transport Engineering Manager) S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer) and E. Sullivan (Senior Committee Services Officer).

RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Leader 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

An apology for absence was received from E. Forehead (Cabinet Member for Social Care)

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor C. Andrews declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 4 – Agile Policies in that her husband works for the local authority.

Whilst a decision for the member, the Monitoring Officer advised that as these were county borough wide policies covering all employees and were not specific to Councillor Andrews husband, declaring a personal interest would be sufficient and therefore there was no requirement for her to leave the meeting and she could take a full part in the debate and vote.

Councillor C. Andrews declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 6 – Housing Revenue Account Charges – 2023-24 in that her father is a Council tenant.

Councillor E. Stenner declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 6 – Housing Revenue Account Charges – 2023-24 in that her brother-in-law rents a Council garage.

Councillor N. George declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 6 – Housing Revenue Account Charges – 2023-24 in that he rents a Council garage.

Councillor J. Pritchard declared a personal interest only in relation to Agenda Item No. 6 – Housing Account Charges – 2023-24 in that his grandmother and aunt are Council tenants.

Whilst a decision for each member, the Monitoring Officer advised that as the matter related to the setting of the rents for all county borough properties including its garages and did not relate to any specific individual or property then declaring a personal interest was appropriate, and therefore the aforementioned Members could take a full part in the debate and vote.

The Head of People Services in relation to Agenda Item No. 4 – Agile Policies felt it important to note that although the policies are of interest to all Officers present because they relate to all, the policies applied equally to all non-school employed staff of the local authority and as the Officers present were not the decision makers and could not vote on this matter there was no declaration of interest to be made and the Officers could remain in the meeting whilst the report was considered. The Monitoring Officer agreed with the comments made by the Head of People Services and pointed out that as the policies related to all employees of this Council and not just the Officers present in the Chamber no declaration was required.

3. CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – TO NOTE

Cabinet was provided with the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, which detailed the scheduled reports until 19th April 2023.

The Leader was pleased to see that the Forward Work Programme had been populated to so far in advance and reminded the Cabinet that that as a live document it would be subject to change. Given the unprecedented budgetary challenges to come he anticipated that the work programme would only increase as those challenges came forward.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the Forward Work Programme be noted. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

4. AGILE POLICIES

Cabinet noted that the report had been considered by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on the 12th December 2022 and a verbal update was given on their comments and it was noted that the Scrutiny Committee had unanimously supported the four draft policies and had recommended their approval to Cabinet.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet agreement in relation to 4 policies that support agile working, the Agile Working Policy, Flexible Working Hours Scheme, Mileage Scheme and Annual Leave Policy. Cabinet noted that discussions had taken place with GMB, Unison and Unite Trade Unions and their feedback was noted in Appendix 5 and 6 of the Officer's report.

The Agile Working Policy provided the framework that emphasises the importance of economic growth, decarbonisation and the health and wellbeing of employees allowing staff to work smarter, remove barriers to working efficiently and by introducing this new model of working wherever possible in the Council improve service delivery. Although Cabinet noted that not all services can accommodate flexible/agile working and the needs of the service being of primary and paramount importance.

The Annual Leave Policy proposed six days additional leave, which included the agreed additional 1 day as part of the National Joint Council Pay Award for 2022/23. Cabinet noted that the estimated additional annual cost would be £2.459m and if endorsed would require Council approval for the growth bid as part of the 2023/24 Budget Proposals.

The Flexible Working Scheme was outlined in Section 5.8 of the Officer's report and Cabinet were referred to the table at 5.8.4 which detailed the main differences between the current and proposed scheme. The Mileage Policy was outlined in Section 5.9 of the Officer's report and noted the principles and rules for claiming travel costs incurred on Council business in accordance with categorisation of staff outlined in the Agile Working Policy.

Cabinet welcomed the comments of the Trade Unions and the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and placed on record their thanks to the Head of People Services and her Team for all the hard work required in the preparations of these policies.

Reference was made to DSE Assessments and if these were being carried out in order to ensure staff health and safety when working from home. The Head of People Services explained the assessment process and confirmed that this was not new to Managers and Staff and that reference resources for Managers were being regularly refreshed and included a video.

Clarification was sought with regard to flexible working and how this would work in terms of contacting Officers during non-working periods. The Head of People Services confirmed that working patterns would need to be agreed with Line Managers who would ensure that they have the staffing required to support service needs. For example, if the service need did not support staff working in the evenings, then unfortunately Managers would not be able to support those requests. However, if staff need to pop out perhaps to the Dentist for example, they advise their Line Manager accordingly and that way if someone was trying to make contact, they would be aware, ensure cover and so avoid unnecessary complaints. The Head of People Services confirmed that it was good managerial practice for managers to know where staff are, whether they were homeworking, out in the community, or in an office building, whilst providing flexibility for staff. These policies support staff and most importantly the provision of services to the residents of the borough.

Cabinet referenced HMRC Payments for homeworking and queried if staff were aware that these claims could be made. The Head of People Services confirmed that although HMRC had made these payments during the Pandemic they were no longer available, however there was still an opportunity to make retrospective claims if staff so wished.

Clarification was then sought on the 7-day working week referenced and whether this could be mandated. The Head of People Services advised that there could be no change to working patterns without consultation with staff and the trade unions.

Cabinet then requested an update on the progress of the new telephony system. The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services confirmed that work was progressing to make telephony more seamless and hoped to be able to pilot the new system shortly.

The Chief Executive placed on record her thanks for the efforts of the Head of People Services and her Team in getting these policies ready and saw the documents under consideration as a significant step forward. Supporting staff flexibility and first and foremost the needs of the service. Cabinet noted that the Chief Executive had been in direct contact with staff whilst working through the development of the policies and they had been warmly welcomed.

Cabinet referenced the Mileage Scheme, and it was proposed that this should be reviewed after a 12-month period to establish if any problematic areas had resulted from its implementation. Officers welcomed the proposal and the Head of People Services confirmed that Senior Officers and Cabinet Members met regularly with Trade Unions and hoped that should any concerns become apparent they would be raised earlier than the 12-month review via these already established mechanisms.

Subject to an additional recommendation 3.1(5) to read that the Mileage Scheme Policy be reviewed after a period of 12 months it was moved and seconded that the recommendations contained within the Officer's report be approved.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's report: -

1. The Agile Working Policy attached at Appendix 1 be agreed.
2. The Flexible Scheme Policy attached at Appendix 3 be agreed.
3. The Mileage Scheme Policy at Appendix 4 be agreed.
4. Subject to Council agreeing the £2.459m funding required to support the policy, as part of the 2023/24 Budget Setting Process the Annual Leave Policy at Appendix 2 be agreed.
5. The Mileage Scheme Policy be reviewed after a period of 12 months.

5. LOW COST HOME OWNERSHIP POLICY

Cabinet noted that the report had been considered by the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on the 29th November 2022.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet approval to formally adopt and subsequently launch the new Low Cost Home Ownership Policy as attached at Appendix 1 of the Officers report.

Cabinet noted that data from the Office of National Statistics showed that the cost of home owning is becoming increasingly more expensive, with house price inflation outstripping growth in income. The policy would help people who are unable to purchase 100% of a property on the open market, help to reduce the numbers of people currently on the common housing register and supported the Council in its ambitions to create balanced and sustainable communities as outlined in the recently approved Local Housing Strategy.

Clarification was sought as to whether the qualifying household income criteria threshold would be updated on annual basis. The Head of Housing advised that the most sensible way to track and review this would be using wage inflation and data from the Office of National Statistics. The Member then sought further information as to the estimated number of people

who could be interested in the scheme and if they did pursue the scheme would this ease the pressure on existing housing stock.

The Officer advised that one of the key benefits of this was that it would allow aspiring homeowners on the current housing register that weren't able to go into full ownership to take on part rent/part ownership and relieve pressure on the register. The Cabinet Member was advised that although the data requested wasn't formally collated at the moment, as the Council did not have a product to offer, there were in excess of 1000 residents who had expressed an interest in entering into this type of product offered by other housing associations partners.

Clarification was then sought on the difference between this policy and tenant buying their own Council homes.

The Officer confirmed that this was completely different to right to buy as it was not about existing contract holders acquiring shares in their existing property but about new properties that will be built by Caerphilly Homes. Building a new additional supply into the County Borough and giving those who are eligible within the criteria access to that product, getting them on the first rung of the home ownership ladder.

Reference was made to the Armed Forces and further detail was sought as to how they would be supported by this policy. The Office confirmed that our Armed Forces received the highest level of priority under this policy and had dispensations from some of the residency criteria.

A Member queried whether a contract holder could lose their investment if they were to fall into rent arrears. The Officer advised that as a Social Landlord, Caerphilly Homes would look at rent arrears on a case-by-case basis and work with that individual. However, it would be different for the mortgage element of the product as this would be a matter for the mortgage provider or bank who would then take a view on whether they had defaulted on their mortgage and any subsequent action.

In relation to home improvements and home maintenance a Members queried if it was possible under this scheme for contract holders to make home improvements and who would be responsible for maintenance and repairs. The Head of Housing confirmed that minor home improvements would be permissible but major improvements such as extensions etc would require permission. In terms of property maintenance that would be the responsibility of the contract holder.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's report he introduction and publication of the new Low Cost Home Ownership Policy be approved.

6. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CHARGES – 2023/2024

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet approval to increase rent charges on council houses and garages.

Cabinet noted that the preparation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget was separate to the work involved in setting the General Fund Budget and Council Tax. The HRA is funded by rental income received from Council Tenants, rather than the Council Taxpayer. Whilst there was a clear separation of these funds, most of the proportion of council tenants

rent is funded from financial support in the form of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, which is derived from the taxpayers' purse, therefore value for money must always be sought.

Cabinet was advised that inflationary increases on providing all aspects of the housing service including material costs, the commitment to Net Carbon Zero and the building of new Council housing all come at a price and an increase to Council rents was required in order to ensure there are adequate resources to effectively manage and maintain our housing stock. Cabinet was asked to note that the Council was continually supporting tenants and had already helped to secure £3.2m of additional benefits, 800 successful applications for discretionary housing payments and helped over 1000 residents with a £200 winter fuel grant.

Cabinet acknowledge that Caerphilly rents were one of the lowest but queried how these rents compared to the private sector. The Officer confirmed that a 3-bed private house rental is around £134 per week (48-week rental period) and in Caerphilly its about £108.80 per week/48-week period. For a 2-bed house in the private sector its about £124 per week with Caerphilly its £101, which equated to around 20% cheaper.

Members asked if a tenant survey had been carried out in relation to the rent increase. The Head of Housing confirmed that Caerphilly Homes carried out regular surveys with tenants and rents had given rise to some very interesting responses, with both positive and negative feedback. However, the overriding majority of contract holders recognised that in order for Caerphilly as a Landlord to continue to provide this level of service delivery an increase in rents was necessary.

Clarification was then sort as to whether any type of affordability modelling had taken place on the 6.5% increase and the Head of Housing advised that the Joseph Rowntree (JR) Matrix had been used and had shown the increase to be well within the affordability threshold under that model. Even an 8% increase had been shown to be 100% below the JR Matrix.

Cabinet welcomed the use of the JR Model and queried whether there had been cross party support for the increase when it had been considered by the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. The Officer confirmed that 85% had agreed with 15% abstaining.

Cabinet noted the considerable efforts being made by the Caerphilly Homes and Caerphilly Cares Teams to assist residents and tenants in terms of the cost of living crisis particularly help and advice on benefit maximisation and although the majority of Council tenants would be in receipt of Housing Benefit, Cabinet were very mindful of the impact of the proposed increase on self-payers and welcomed the comments of the Head of Housing in relation to sustaining tenancies and tenancy support.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's report: -

Cabinet considered and noted the recommendations of the Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.

1. Rent be increased per property to a maximum permitted as per the WG rent policy which is 6.5%. (Increasing the current average rent by £6.10 per week from £93.80 to £99.90 per week over 52 weeks)
2. The level of rent for garages from April 2023 be increased by 5.5% to £8.85 per week.

7. COUNCIL TAX BASE

Consideration was given to the report which provided details of the Council Tax base for tax setting purposes and the collection percentage to be applied and sought Cabinet agreement for the calculation of the Council Tax Base for the 2023/24 financial year.

Cabinet sought clarification as to why the Council Tax base was set on Band D properties and the Officer confirmed that this was required by Welsh Government and was identified as the middle band when Council Tax was first introduced.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's report: -

1. The Council Tax collection rate be maintained at 97.50% for the 2023/24 financial year.
2. The Council Tax Base for to 2023/24 be 61,135.13, with the Council Tax Base for each Community Council Area being outlined in paragraph 5.6.

8. PUBLIC INTEREST TEST

Members considered the Public Interest Test and concluded that on balance the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and it was: -

RESOLVED that in accordance with Section 100(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting because of the likely disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

9. A468/B4600 BEDWAS BRIDGE ROUNDABOUT IMPROVEMENT

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendations in the report be approved and by way of Microsoft Forms this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that for the reasons contained in the Officer's report the recommendation at 3.1 and 3.2 of the Officer's report be approved.

The meeting closed at 2.15p.m.

Approved and signed as a correct record subject to any corrections made at the meeting held on 25th January 2023

CHAIR