



CABINET

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON WEDNESDAY 13TH DECEMBER 2023 AT 1PM

PRESENT:

Councillor S. Morgan – Chair

Councillors:

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

Together with:

D. Street (Deputy Chief Executive), R. Edmunds (Corporate Director of Education and Corporate Services), M.S. Williams (Corporate Director of Economy and Environment) and G. Jenkins (Interim Director of Social Services).

Also in Attendance:

R. Kyte (Head of Regeneration and Planning), S. Harris (Head of Financial Services and S151 Officer), L. Lane (Head of Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), L. Allen (Principal Group Accountant – Housing), S. Issacs (Rents Manager), R. Thomas (Planning Services Manager), A. Lewis (Transformation Project Officer), P. Cooke (Transformation Manager (Lead) – Decarbonisation), S. O'Donnell (Principal Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rate Officer), A. West (Sustainable Communities for Learning Manager), F. Wilkins (Housing Services Manager), N. Taylor-Williams (Head of Housing), J. Reynolds (Landlord Services Manager), P. Thomas (Heritage and Placemaking Officer), K. Watkins (Communications and Tenant Engagement Officer) D. Lucas (Team Leader, Strategic Planning) and J. Thomas (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

Apologies for absence were received from C. Harry (Chief Executive) and R. Tranter (Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 7 Housing Revenue Account Charges – 2024/2025

Councillor C. Andrews in that a relative for whom she has power of attorney is a Council Tenant.

Councillor N. George in that he is a Garage Tenant.

Councillor E. Stenner in that a relative is a Garage Tenant.

Councillor P. Leonard in that she is a Garage Tenant.

Councillor J. Pritchard in that a relative is a Council House Tenant.

Councillor S. Cook in that a relative is a Council House Tenant.

As these were personal interests only there was no requirement for them to leave the Chamber and they could take a full part in the debate and vote.

Councillor J. Pritchard declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 10 Listed Buildings at Risk Register and Strategy in that he is a supporter of the Ruperra Preservation Trust. As this was a personal interest only there was no requirement for him to leave the Chamber and he could take a full part in the debate and vote.

Councillor C. Morgan declared a personal and prejudicial interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 10 Listed Buildings at Risk Register and Strategy in that he is a Trustee of Ruperra Castle Trust and left the meeting when this item was discussed.

Councillor C. Andrews declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 12 Consultation on Proposals to Implement Council Tax Premiums on Long- Term Empty Properties and Second Homes in that a relative has a house which has been empty for several years. As this was a personal interest only there was no requirement for her to leave the Chamber and she could take a full part in the debate and vote.

3. MINUTES – WEDNESDAY 15TH NOVEMBER 2023

RESOLVED that Subject to an amendment to paragraph 2 at Agenda item 5 (Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre) which reads: *'Cabinet Welcomed Mr Lloyd, a local resident speaking against the closure of the Leisure Centre.'* The amendment to read *'Cabinet Welcomed Mr Lloyd, a local resident speaking against the proposal for the Leisure Centre to remain closed.'*

The minutes of Cabinet held on 15th November 2023 were approved as a correct record.

4. CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – TO NOTE

Cabinet was provided with the Cabinet Forward Work Programme, which detailed the scheduled reports until 27th February 2023.

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.

5. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FOR LEARNING BAND B PROGRAMME - CONSULTATION REPORT: YSGOL Y LAWNT AND UPPER RHYMNEY PRIMARY SCHOOL PROPOSAL.

Considered by Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee on the 28th November, 2023.

Consideration was given to the report which provided Cabinet with an update on the Sustainable Communities for Learning Band B proposal in respect of the relocation of Ysgol Y Lawnt and Upper Rhymney Primary School and sought Cabinet approval to proceed to Statutory Notice.

Cabinet noted the proposal sought to create a sustainable school building with shared facilities, to accommodate Ysgol Y Lawnt, Upper Rhymney Primary School and Community use. The two schools will continue to provide both Welsh and English Medium Primary education and remain as separate entities, situated within the new dual purpose building.

Following queries raised by Cabinet the Sustainable Communities for Learning Manager clarified that the report went out to a public consultation which was to obtain views, before the Cabinet consider the publication of a statutory notice for a 28 day consultation. The statutory consultation is the point where people are able to formal object or support the proposal. Following the publication of the Statutory Notice an Objection report would be brought before Cabinet in April 2024 for Cabinet consideration.

Cabinet noted that the WG School Organisation Code provided a prescribed list on consultees who had all been contacted as part of the consultation process. In addition all parents at both schools were also included in the consultation process.

There were 19 responses received, 18 online and 1 via email. Only one of the responses received was done through the medium of Welsh. Which are broken down within the report.

The Officer gave Cabinet reassurance that all relevant parties would be involved in the design aspect of the school and Community facilities to ensure all needs are met.

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.

It was noted that as Councillor P. Leonard had not been present for the whole of the debate, therefore she did not take part in the vote.

RESOLVED for reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The information contained in the Consultation Report was considered.
2. To proceed to Statutory Notice in relation to the proposal for Ysgol Y Lawnt and Upper Rhymney Primary School be approved.

6. SCHOOL ORGANISATION CODE 2018 - CONSULTATION REPORT: PROPOSAL FOR THE CLOSURE OF CWM GLAS INFANT SCHOOL.

Considered by Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee on the 28th November, 2023.

Consideration was given to the report which provided Cabinet with an update in relation to the proposed closure of Cwm Glas Infants School by July 2024 and sought Cabinet approval to proceed to Statutory Notice.

Following a query raised by Cabinet, the Officer advised that the consultation recognised there had been recurrent themes that emerged e.g. the transition processes and the impact on the pupils, however the Officer explained that the pupils at Cwm Glas Infants School would be expected to transition to Coedybrain Primary School at Key Stage 2 subject to parental preference. Therefore, the proposal is to transition at an earlier stage. Cabinet was assured that colleagues within admissions would work closely with parents, throughout the transition. The consultation also saw concerns regarding staffing implications. An assurance was made to Cabinet that HR provide all relevant support to staff throughout the process.

Cabinet sought clarification on the consultation process. The Office assured Cabinet that all the relevant parties as outlined in the WG School Organisation Code had been part of the consultation process. There had been 21 responses which are all contained within the report.

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 reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The information contained in the Consultation Report was considered.
2. To proceed to Statutory Notice in relation to the proposal to close Cwm Glas Infant School by July 2024 be approved.

7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT CHARGES - 2024/2025.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet's views on the increased Council Housing rent charges proposed within the report, prior to consideration by Cabinet. The charges predominantly focus on council house rents, but also include garages, and are intended to be effective for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the 2024/2025 financial year.

Cabinet noted the report had been considered at the Special Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee held on the 21st November 2023 and their comments were included in the Consultation Section 10 of the report.

Following a query raised by Cabinet, The Head of Housing advised a part of the commitment with Welsh Government the Council must adopt a recognised affordability benchmark, when setting rents year on year. Caerphilly Homes have adopted the benchmark, which is set by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, called the Living Rent Model, and is used to check affordability.

Cabinet noted that when looking at that affordability benchmark model, the vast majority of all of Caerphilly homes, even with the 6.7% increase, is still considered affordable and below that threshold and therefore, deemed affordable against that benchmark the stats within the report explain the exact the level of rent. In terms of Caerphilly's weekly rent, it is 5.2% lower than an all Wales average for local authorities.

Cabinet further noted that the Caerphilly Homes' rents are affordable and significantly lower than the private sector. Caerphilly Homes are also the third lowest rents against other Local Authorities.

Cabinet sought clarification on the support that is being given to 23% of Caerphilly Homes' customers that are not claiming housing benefit or Universal Credit. The Officer assured Cabinet that the Rents Team focus on tenancy support. There have been 2,700 tenants

which have received support and advice. There have been 712 successful applications for discretionary housing payments and 310 referrals to Citizens Advice Bureau.

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 reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. Cabinet considered and gave their views on the recommendations included within the report.
2. The following increases from April 2024 based on the options explained in the report be approved.
 - (i) Rent be increased per property to the maximum permitted as per the WG rent policy which is 6.7%. This would increase the current average rent by £6.68 per week from £99.72 to £106.40 per week over 52 weeks.
 - (ii) The level of rent for garages from April 2024 be increased by the same level at 6.7% to £9.44 per week.

8. HOUSING OFFICES RATIONALISATION.

Consideration was given to the report which sought the both the views and approval of Cabinet on the proposals to permanently close the Housing Offices at Gilfach, Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Ty Sign, replacing them with a centralised housing service, based at Penallta House, as part of a proposal to modernise and improve housing services.

Cabinet noted the report was presented to the Special Housing and Environment Scrutiny Committee on the 21st November 2023 and their comments had been included in the Consultation Section 10 of the report.

Cabinet queried if the Housing Offices could be repurposed into further housing options. The Officer confirmed that the sites will be assessed and if suitable there is a potential for them to be developed into living accommodation. Although the Officer did advise Cabinet that not all of the assets that they are looking to close are with the control of the HRA.

Clarification was sought on whether the Library Hubs will be utilised, so that residents can access housing services localities. The Officer confirmed that this will be one of many services that will be made available. There will also be digital engagement including through the introduction of a new Tenant Portal.

In response to a query raised regarding service delivery improvements and surgeries that have been held in the Community, the Housing Services Manager advised Cabinet that they have been piloted in a number of areas which include Caerphilly, Blackwood, Rhymney, Risca, Graig Rhacca and at Ty Penallta. However, these were appointment only, and a number of them were carried out during COVID restrictions Therefore, they were limited in what was being offered and levels of success varied. There has been feedback on the areas where the pilots were less successful, that there is need to have more digital engagement or for home visits. The Officer assured Cabinet that surgeries will continued to be developed and kept under review to establish levels of demand.

Cabinet noted that over 10700 letters were sent to tenant households during the consultation period. However, there were very few responses received. However over 70% of the responses were in favour of the offices being out in the community rather than in one location.

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 reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The permanent closure of the Housing Offices at Lansbury Park, Graig Yr Rhacca and Gilfach, and the Community Housing Office at Ty Sign be approved.
2. The transition of the Landlord Service from a traditional office-based model to a community-based delivery model be approved.
3. The relocation of the Landlord Service to Penallta House where the wider Caerphilly Homes Housing Service has recently relocated be approved.

9. DRAFT GREATER BLACKWOOD MASTERPLAN.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet endorsement for the Draft Greater Blackwood Masterplan and also sought Cabinet's approval to consult the public on the Masterplan between 3 January and 14 February 2024.

Cabinet noted that this is the fifth out of five masterplans for the Borough Council.

Responding to queries raised, the Team Leader for Strategic Planning addressed the Cabinet and explained that the draft masterplan is a document which sets out a development strategy and a framework to stimulate economic, social and cultural activity in the area and coordinate regeneration initiatives to maximise the potential benefits to the County Borough.

Responding to a query raised in respect of bank closures, the Officer advised that there is recognition that the such services provided within the town centres are reducing. Therefore, although the document does not identify every proposal it does provide the framework within which proposals to address such issues can come forward.

The Corporate Director of Economy and Environment advised Cabinet that a more detailed Blackwood town place making plan is also in the early stages of preparation and will identify specific sites and development opportunities. The Officer explained that bank closures will likely affect footfall on the High Street. However, there are opportunities to work with other organisations, such as Smart Money Cymru and the Post Offices to provide banking services and any vacant buildings can provide opportunities through repurposing to other uses such as living accommodation or new retail outlets.

Responding to a query raised, Cabinet was assured that Authorities Regeneration Team that focuses on the delivery of regeneration proposals and work closely with WG. Having this document in place (and supported by the town centre placemaking plan) is fundamental and provides the basis upon which to bid for funding from a range of sources (particularly WG town centre first funding). Not having the document would mean that we would be in a far weaker position.

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 for reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The Draft Greater Blackwood Masterplan be endorsed.

2. The publication of Draft Greater Blackwood Masterplan be approved for comment for a six-week period between 3rd January and 14th February 2024

10. LISTED BUILDINGS AT RISK REGISTER AND STRATEGY.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet approval for the Authority's Buildings at Risk Register and Strategy which sets out a framework for the preservation and enhancement of listed buildings at risk over the period 2023-2028.

Responding to a query raised, the Planning Services Manager advised Cabinet that most of the listed structures in the Borough are in private ownership. Although the Council does have a range of statutory powers available the main priority is to work with owners to secure improvements and bring the buildings into beneficial use.

Cabinet also noted that there is £400,000 available from the Shared Prosperity Fund to provide grants for works to listed buildings at risk and this strategy will provide the basis upon which to prioritise expenditure.

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 for reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The report and the 2023 Buildings at Risk Register be noted.
2. The Buildings at Risk Strategy be endorsed and adopted.

11. COUNCIL TAX BASE 2024/25.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet approval of the calculation of the Council Tax Base for the 2024/25 financial year. The report provided Cabinet with details of the Council Tax base for 2024/25 for tax setting purposes and the collection percentage to be applied.

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

It was noted that as Councillor N. George had not been present for the whole of the debate, he did not take part in the vote.

RESOLVED that for reasons contained within the Officers report:

1. The Council Tax collection rate is maintained at 97.50% for the 2024/25 financial year be agreed.
2. The Council Tax Base for 2024/25 be 61,292.66, with the Council Tax Base for each Community Council area being as outlined in paragraph 5.6. of the report be agreed.

12. CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS TO IMPLEMENT COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS ON LONG-TERM EMPTY PROPERTIES AND SECOND HOMES.

Consideration was given to the report which sought Cabinet approval to undertake a

consultation process on the levels of council tax premiums to apply to long-term empty dwellings and second homes.

The 'Private Sector Empty Homes Strategy 2023-2028' has previously been approved by Cabinet, and this included in principle agreement to explore the introduction of an empty homes council tax premium to incentivise private sector empty property owners into action.

Cabinet noted that the final determination to introduce council tax premiums, and the level of such premiums, must be made by full Council.

Cabinet was provided with information concerning discretionary powers that the Council has to charge higher amounts of council tax (a premium) on certain dwellings provided for by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

Following queries raised, the Principal Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rate Officer advised Cabinet that following a property becoming vacant, there is a statutory exemption of 6 months and after 1 year a premium can be charged.

Cabinet was assured that as part of the consultation, all council tax payers who will potentially be impacted by the introduction of premiums will be written to or emailed. There will also be engagement with Stakeholders, Elected Members, the Citizens Advice Bureau, and Social Landlords. Officers will also ensure that details of the consultation are publicised through our normal communication channels. Contact will also be made with estate agents, in order that they can advise potential buyers that empty premises could be subject to premiums should the property remain vacant for a specific length of time.

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 within the Officers report:

1. The details of the discretionary powers relating to council tax premiums as outlined in the report be noted.
2. A consultation exercise on the proposed levels of council tax premiums to apply to both long-term empty dwellings and second homes as set out in the report be approved.
3. A further report, including the results of the consultation exercise, be presented to Cabinet to consider and determine the level of council tax premiums that it would recommend to full Council be approved.

13. PUBLIC INTEREST TEST.

Members considered the Public Interest Test and concluded that on balance the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interests 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.

14. CWM IFOR SOLAR FARM UPDATE REPORT.

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

RESOLVED that for reasons contained within the Officers report the recommendation be approved.

The meeting closed at 14.18 p.m.

Approved and signed as a correct record subject to any corrections made at the meeting held on 17th January 2024.

CHAIR