

**Community, Finance and Strategic Leadership Scrutiny Committee
(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft
Teams)**

Members Present:

5 September 2024

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

Councillors: T.Bowen, C.Galsworthy, J.Henton, J.Jones,
S.Paddison, R.Phillips, S.Pursey,
S.H.Reynolds, A.Dacey, S.Thomas and
A.R.Aubrey

**Officers In
Attendance** C.Griffiths, S.Rees, N.Daniel, A.Jarrett,
H.Jones, A.D.Thomas, C.Furlow-Harris,
A.James, R.Livingstone, C.Owen, G. Powell
and A.Thomas.

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors S.K.Hunt and S.A.Knoyle

Observers Councillor Jo Hale
Councillor Cen Phillips

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

Cllr S Reynolds Item 6(c) – Personal, Trustee of Canolfan Maerdy

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record.

4. **To consider items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme**

The committee considered the items selected from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme.

(a) **Procurement Strategy**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers confirmed that the draft strategy is the first time that the Council have put in place an overarching procurement strategy which links all the various policies relating to procurement. The strategy aims to link all the various strategic objectives and the legislative requirements that sit around procurement.

The strategy aims to demonstrate the council's compliance with the legal commitments required. It also ensures that the strategic priorities of the Council are met. The policy has been structured with socially responsible procurement objectives. Officers highlighted the objectives outlined in the report.

Members referred to page 19 of the report, paragraphs 22-23 and the valleys communities impact assessment. Members expressed their concern that the information only indicated statistics and did not clearly outline the impacts on valleys communities. Members were also keen to ensure that strategies relating to small business etc. were followed and sought assurance from officers in relation to this. Will there be sufficient time for various organisations to work together on a contract? Officers confirmed that when the new procurement rules are developed and reflected in standing orders, there will be more of an onus on officers to consider things, such as timescales. Officers will have to actively give consideration to certain factors to be in compliance with the rules. A procurement planning document will be developed that highlights how factors have been considered, why things are being done in a certain way and why certain timescales are being followed. This will allow for a very clear rationale with regards to the way items are procured.

Members referred to the phrase 'securing value for money' and were keen to ensure that members of the public who may read the document understood that this does not necessarily mean accepting the lowest bid. Officers confirmed that the Standing Orders of the

Council will define what 'value for money' is. The current definition matches Welsh Government policy. It outlines that value for money is not just primarily focused on cost. Value for money arrangements should be considered as the optimum combination of whole life costs, in terms of not only generating efficiency savings, but good quality outcome for the organisation, but also a benefit to the society, the economy and environment, both now and in the future. Whilst cost will undoubtedly be a factor, it will require consideration of a number of different issues.

Members noted that there was no mention of the Trading Standards approved traders list within the document. Officers confirmed that there is currently work ongoing in relation to the select list. This will be incorporated into the Standing Orders which can be used when looking to procure items.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation outlined in the draft Cabinet report.

5. **To consider items from the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme**

There were no items to consider from the scrutiny committee forward work programme.

6. **Performance Monitoring**

Members considered performance monitoring items.

(a) **Welsh Language Standards Annual Report 2023-2024**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

The Cabinet Member outlined that the report summarises the work that Neath Port Talbot Council has undertaken to comply with the Welsh Language Standards. The Welsh Language Standards ensure that the Welsh language is not treated less favourably than English in Wales. A compliance notice was issued in September 2015 by the commissioner which outlined which standards the authority must comply with. The Council are under a duty to issue an annual report to show that they have complied with the standards. The compliance

has been assessed as good by the Welsh Language Commissioner, however it is recognised that there is still work to do in this area.

Members queried if there were any statistics to accompany the report and if they reflected if there has been an increase in the use of Welsh language throughout the authority. Officers confirmed that in the report there is some anecdotal information which indicates that there has been a small increase. The statistics that are actually collected relate to Welsh speakers, whereby persons are asked to indicate their fluency etc. It is noted that there has been an increase in the use of Welsh internally for example in the employee engagement survey, which was offered in both Welsh and English. These items will be reflected in the report for 2024-2025.

Members referred to a paragraph on page 4 of the report which outlined the impact of the standards on public engagement. It has been noticeable where very lengthy questions on the impact of Welsh language in relation to an item, has popped up on external consultation documents. Members expressed their concern that the authority was asking the public for the impact on Welsh language, when this could be done by officers in their assessment.

Members noted on page 6 of the report, it refers to simultaneous translation. It should be made clear that it is only Full Council meetings that simultaneous translation is available. Simultaneous translation is limited.

Officers confirmed that the questions asked, which are used to determine what affect a decision taken has on the Welsh language, are taken from the Welsh Language Commissioners guidance on good practice. Officers have tested various ways of setting out the questions. It is also part of the IIA process. Further, in order to ensure that people don't get overwhelmed, an explanation will be provided outlining the reasons as to why the questions are being asked.

Members referred to the statistics outlined in the report which refers to the number of fluent/fairly fluent Welsh speakers and how this figure is larger than the number identified on the directory. Members indicated that this was a concern to them. Officers outlined that the directory only identifies staff who answer the phone in Welsh. The statistics from iTrent collect data from all members of staff, including frontline staff who will not be identified on the directory. Members queried the difference in the two sets of data collected and why Welsh speaking frontline staff are not identified on the staff directory.

Officers outlined that they are not identified as they are not contactable by email or a telephone line. However, officers can consider how data is collected for future reports.

Members and officers recognised the importance of creating an environment within the organisation which encourages Welsh learners to practice their skills.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(b) Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2024-25

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers confirmed that this report shows income and expenditure until June 2024 and then this data is used to formulate a projection for the end of the financial year. At this point in time, the projected overspend for the whole of Council at the year-end is £1.8m

Members referred to the items identified using the RAG method and queried the status of the amber items. Officers confirmed that items identified as green are completed as at the end of June. If an item is identified as amber, officers are confident as at the end of March they will be completed.

Members queried the overspends identified in the education budget. Further, if there was an indication about the anticipated level of school reserves, as this will impact on the wider council budget.

In terms of the overspend, members drew attention to the unattained vacancy targets. Members queried if there was an ongoing issue with regards to unattained vacancy targets and what would the impact of achieving those have on the stresses of staff moving forward? Officers confirmed in terms of schools, they are expected to increase their deficits by £7.6m by the end of the financial year. Officers have met with the Director of Education and the Chief Executive to try and determine how to mitigate this. A report is also scheduled for a future Cabinet meeting which will consider this item in further detail.

Members referred to 'other country parks' and also specifically The Gnoll. It was noted that the report is up until the end of June, however it references reasons referring to August. Officers confirmed that they will use information they are aware of to predict the position as at the

end of the financial year. Therefore, information will be provided which refers to the whole year.

Members referred to the item public lighting and the RAG table. The report references that the £220k saving is unlikely to be achieved due to the price increases, however the item is currently identified as green on the RAG table. Officers confirmed that the saving in relation to dimming has been achieved, in terms of the energy usage of the lights, however because the price has not decreased as much as anticipated, it is still showing as an overspend. The RAG rating is green due to the fact that the consumption target has been met, but it shows as an overspend due to the price of the units, not the usage.

Members referred to the red item on the report, the technical infrastructure modernisation in digital services. Members queried if this is still going ahead and what the explanation is behind the red status. Officers advised that whilst the saving was attached to digital services, the budget for the savings sits within the Environment directorate. Therefore, the savings will not be achieved by digital services, therefore is flagged as red, however the savings itself has been achieved through the Environment directorate, where the budget sits.

Members referred to the overspend identified in the school transport budget and the consultancy cost. Members queried what service the consultancy carried out that the internal staff could not do and what would have been the overspend if internal staff had been used to carry out the work?

Officers advised that the overspend is due to an increase in places for home to school transport since the budget was set. Members were advised with regards to the consultancy query, if this they wish to take forward it should be done via the appropriate scrutiny committee, which would be the Environment scrutiny committee, which is where school contracts ultimately vest.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(c) **Capital Budget Monitoring 2024-25**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members referred to the shared prosperity fund. Members noted that the funds have to be spent before the end of December and queried if this target was achievable. There has been an indication that the authority now have until the end of February to spend the funding. The individual officers managing the projects have also indicated that funding should be spent before the end of February.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation outlined in the draft Cabinet report.

(d) Treasury Management Outturn 2024-25

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers outlined this item was a monitoring report.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

7. **Selection of items for future scrutiny**

Officers referred to the item concerning transport arrangements which was raised at a previous forward work programme session. Officers reassured members that work is ongoing, however the complexity of the work was noted. There is work ongoing within the Corporate Joint Committee in terms of regional transport strategies. The officer advised that this item will be raised at the next Chairs/Vice-Chairs Forum to determine how to take it forward. It may be that a report can be brought forward with a Task & Finish Group and suggested Terms of Reference which can outline the scope of the item and what will be considered.

The Forward Work Programme was noted.

8. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON