

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

Members Present:

13 January 2025

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

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

**Officers In
Attendance** C.Griffiths, S.Rees, N.Daniel, H.Jones,
A.Thomas and C.Owen

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

Observers Councillors S.Jones, J.Hale and C.Phillips.

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **Budget 2025/2026**

Members considered the report as circulated with the agenda pack.

The Chair reminded members that comments from the meeting will form part of the formal consultation response for the budget. Members are encouraged to put forward any alternative proposals which can then be considered once the consultation period has ended.

The Director of Strategy and Corporate Services provided an outline of the proposals contained within the report. The directorate delivers services that are critical in supporting all directors to deliver the corporate plan priorities that will improve the lives and residents of Neath Talbot Council. People, organisation development, legal services and digital services are all key enabling services and it's essential these services are as efficient and as streamlined as possible.

The directorate ensure that there are robust governance arrangements in place corporately and key strategic documents to lead on and deliver the Future of Strategic Workforce Plan, the Digital Data and Technology Strategy, the Procurement Strategy. All of these have a vast impact on how the Council operate.

The directorate also play a key role in support the work of the Freeport and City Deal and the Corporate Joint Committee.

The proposals put forward are a mix of transformational change in the way the directorate delivers its services. The directorate are always considering how value can be added to the services delivered by the directorate.

The directorate has the smallest overall budget, and over 90% of this relates to staff costs. Officers confirmed that the directorate are the only one to deliver the 5% budget savings target for 2025-2026 which is on top of cuts that have been made previously. The cuts equate to over £650,000. The directorate currently has 351 fulltime equivalents, of which 45 are currently funded either from reserves, grants or departmental recharges.

The proposals outlined in the report indicate that the directorate are losing 7.6 posts, together with some reduction in hours to other posts. The impacts of the loss of these posts has been articulated within the report, and it will have an impact on the ability to deliver effective and timely services in supporting other directorates.

Members considered the portfolio of Chris Owen, Chief Digital Officer.

Members noted that a large amount of savings was based on voluntary redundancies. Member queried if the voluntary

redundancies are confirmed and if not, how confident are officers that there are enough volunteers to come forward.

Officers confirmed in terms of the three senior infrastructure operations engineer posts, those are all confirmed. The reduction in working hours of £9,895 is also confirmed as a saving for 2025-26. With reference to the two Grade 9 and one Grade 5 voluntary redundancies, the process is still ongoing and are yet to be confirmed.

There are currently people considering the other voluntary redundancy posts and further information is required to be obtained before there can be any release on these posts. It is accepted that there is a risk at the moment with not meeting these savings targets.

It was confirmed by the officer that work has been carried out on succession planning arrangements and he is confident that the teams which are absorbing the work from the redundancies have capacity to do so. However, it is accepted that there will be an impact on possible delayed times to responding to incidents that are dealt with by the service desk, and in terms of the loss in the breadth of skills and expertise within the teams.

Members queried what the monitoring of workloads will look like and sought further detail on this. Officers confirmed there is full transparency across all the demand that goes through the members of the team. There is a service desk platform which looks at the number of incidents that come in from users and officers can monitor how much demand has been placed on each individual team member. There is also full transparency around all the project work that is ongoing across digital services, with a full backlog of different activities that are in the pipeline effectively to be undertaken going forward.

Members expressed their concern in relation to the identified impact in the ability to maintain the current level of service. Members queried, if officers are identifying that there's going to be service delivery delays, has the work already been undertaken on benchmarking, so that it can be seen what impact this will have moving forward?

It was noted that very often it is senior officers in any department that are eligible to take the voluntary redundancy and then the experience

of these officers is lost when the person leaves the authority. Members queried, if the authority are removing senior infrastructure operators, how are those gaps in experience and knowledge going to be overcome as the posts cannot be filled as they are being removed from the structure. Is the succession planning that officers have referred to going to take into account this loss of experience and the loss of senior posts for people to progress into?

Officers confirmed in terms of benchmarking, there are SLA agreements and metrics that are monitored as part of performance monitoring of the teams. The impact of the posts being removed from the structure will be monitored. Officers are confident that impacts from loss of posts will be minor however will continue to monitor the risks around this.

In terms succession planning and the loss of experience, knowledge and expertise, officers have ensured that the infrastructure operation engineer posts are exposed to the work of the senior infrastructure operation engineers to try and mitigate risks. Whilst it is accepted that they do not have the same experience in terms of timescale, they are able to maintain the systems and services, due to the exposure to the work that they have had.

Members requested that, should this item be agreed as part of the budget, that benchmark data is added to the Forward Work Programme for monitoring, to ensure that the impacts on service delivery are monitored.

Members queried how the use of AI for barrier use could generate an income for the authority? Officers confirmed that this is a model that has been successfully deployed to Tregelles Court and relates to the out of hours monitoring of the site. Previously security guards were used which cost the authority in the region of £95,000/year. However, there is now a new barrier control system with AI and full camera monitoring which links back to the CCTV control room. A service level agreement has been established with environment where digital services can monitor for £15,000/year, reducing the costs to the environment directorate, and bringing it back into CCTV.

Members queried the security risks in relation to the hardware and software changes that are being proposed. Officers confirmed from a cyber resilience perspective, there is no impact. However, officers confirmed that in terms of cuts to digital services, the service is at the edge of what can be cut safely.

Members considered the portfolio of Sheenagh Rees, Head of People and Organisational Development.

Members referred to the risk identified in relation to the loss of income from TATA Steel. It was confirmed that the HSE determines whether or not a site is a COMAH site. Following the closure of the blast furnace, the quantities of hazardous materials and substances located on the site is expected to decrease, however the timescale for this has not yet been determined. Therefore, the figure for the income cannot yet be determined.

In terms of the increase to the fees, officers confirmed that they were last reviewed about six years ago. It is proposed to increase the fees so that each COMAH site has an increase of £761.50PA.

Officers confirmed that fees are charged on a cost recovery basis. Members raised concerns that the increase in fees was not a new income but merely off-setting the increase in staff costs. There was also concern that the narrative indicated an increase in support to COMAH sites, however there is going to be a reduction staff.

Officers advised that there will be a temporary reduction in professional office hours in order to fund the administrative staff member to gain a professional qualification. That member of staff will gain the experience and skills and ability to cover some of the professional work. Members were advised that the reduction in staff hours will not affect the on-call rota.

It was acknowledged that as staff numbers are reducing, the workload is also increasing. Officers confirmed that they are currently looking at how work can be removed from the team. This includes the consideration of using AI where appropriate. Members did express their concern about relying on software/hardware within the Council yet there are reductions being made to this. Officers stressed the importance of staff adding value to the services that all delivered and stripping out all the processes/mundane tasks that can be undertaken by AI.

Members considered the portfolio of Craig Griffiths, Head of Legal & Democratic Services.

Members queried the trend on the number of Freedom of Information requests that are being received by the authority. Officers advised

that the general trend was relatively stable. However, it was noted that officers are being trained to monitor the inbox and make sure that all requests are being co-ordinated under the direction of the Business Support Manager in Legal & Democratic Services. It was also noted that there are a lot of repeat requests that come in, so consideration is being given to publicising some of the requests that are received so future requests can be referred to the website.

Members noted the processes that are undertaken within the mailroom. It was outlined to members that the volume of mail is decreasing and there are processes being put in place to assist the department in working more effectively. There are also statutory obligations that must be met. Members asked that this item be benchmarked and monitored moving forward.

Members noted that a uniform 5% savings target across the various departments placed an unfair burden on some services.

Members referred to the savings proposals relating to the reduction in legal services resources and expressed their concern that this proposal would cause delays in officers finding the relevant information they require. Officers recognised that there are some slight issues that come with it, but it's something that can be managed by making sure that people have the training and the different opportunities which are afforded by the remaining providers to know how to access all of the information they may require. Also, people will become more accustomed to using the resources available. It was noted that the department would not be able to afford to lose any more resources.

In reference to the proposals relating to electoral services, members were concerned about saving money when by-elections etc. cannot be predicted. Officers advised that the figures have been benchmarked against previous years. There is also an electoral reserve to fund any County Borough Council elections. This is something that will have to be actively monitored.

Members considered the portfolio of Huw Jones, Director of Finance.

Officers confirmed that the Council has 14 different insurance policies which are retendered on a 5-year basis. When the policies were retendered in October 2023, this resulted in savings of £240,000, mainly due to the good claims history of the authority. This saving has been delivered over two financial years.

In terms of the service remodelling outlined, officers confirmed that there has been one post lost through voluntary redundancy. The team are also looking at robotic process automation, which would allow for another person to leave via voluntary redundancy once this process is established.

Following scrutiny, the committee noted the report.

4. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON