

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

Members Present:

18 July 2024

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

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

Officers In Attendance S.Brennan, N.Daniel, C.Furrow-Harris, A.James, L.McAndrew, S.Rees and A.Thomas

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

Observers Councillor S. Freeguard
Councillor W.F. Griffiths
Councillor J. Hale
Councillor A. Llewelyn

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **To consider items selected from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme**

The committee considered the items selected from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme as set out in 3a, 3b and 3c of the agenda pack.

(a) **Corporate Plan 2024-2027 Working towards a more prosperous, fairer and greener NPT**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members expressed their concern that members of the public may be confused with regards to the purpose of the Corporate Plan.

Members of the public may perceive it as a manifesto for Council, as opposed to the aspirations of Council. Members suggested that a paragraph be inserted which outlines what is possible for the Council, the items that the Council can control, and the items where it has no control. It should be clearly outlined where the Council has links to stakeholders, but that the Council has no control over the policy and actions of the stakeholders.

Concerns were raised over housing within the borough and the ability to provide housing for the job opportunities that are arising within the Borough.

Members emphasised that communication is key for the Corporate Plan. It is important that it accurately reflects what is under the Council's jurisdiction and what is not.

The Leader emphasised that the Corporate Plan is a live document and that external factors will affect what can be achieved within the plan. There also needs to be a public friendly document which sets out the aspirations of the Council and reflects what has already been delivered by the authority.

Officers confirmed that the Corporate Plan is a statutory document and it does need to cover a number of areas to comply with legislation. In terms of managing the expectations of the public, it is recognised that the Corporate Plan has been drafted recognising the significant financial challenges faced by the Council. The document also sets out the transformation strategies that have been agreed by the Council.

The Corporate Plan refers to the Events Strategy. Members expressed their preference that the process to organise events be simplified. Officers advised that a policy will be brought before members shortly on this item. This will hopefully simplify the process and encourage events to take place within the borough.

Members referred to the 'best start in life' objective in relation to reducing exclusions. Members commented that it would be extremely difficult to complete this action, especially noting the number of schools that are in deficit budgets or are headed into deficit budgets.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation set out in the draft Cabinet Report.

(b) Strategic Equality Plan 2024/2028

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers outlined that this is a plan that is governed by statute. The equality objectives outlined within the plan have not changed since the last plan as it is felt that they are still relevant to the communities within Neath Port Talbot. As a result of this there was no requirement for the authority to consult on the plan. It is noted that the action section has been updated to make it more SMART. It now includes not only the actions, but also the outcomes and measures against each action. This will assist in measuring progress against each action and will be used to assist with presenting information on the Strategic Equality Plan Annual Report moving forward. It is noted that in the revision of the plan, there was a wide corporate effort with input from across the whole Council.

Members queried if job applications for employment across the authority are being anonymised or are there some exceptions? Officers confirmed that the authority has the capability to anonymise application forms and currently this is an option that recruiting managers can select. It is not yet mandatory. In order to make it mandatory the Recruitment and Selection Policy will need to be changed. Before this is done, officers will carry out a lot of awareness raising with recruiting managers and this will be done in a range of ways.

There is one specific appointment where the application form was not anonymised. This related to the Chief Executive post. It was recognised that in order to anonymise the application form a large amount of information would have needed to have been stripped from the form which would have made shortlisting very difficult.

Officers advised that the amended policy would be presented to the Personnel Committee before Christmas.

Members expressed their concerns about providing equitable and inclusive education to all pupils, particularly those from low income families. Sandfields Primary was identified by the local member as an outlier in terms of all social deprivation indexes. Members expressed their concern in terms of the funding for the school and the support that is required in the school. The member was advised that information would be obtained and disseminated to the local member following the meeting.

Members considered digital inclusion outlined within the plan. Concern was expressed about the little detail included within the plan in terms of age discrimination and mental capacity for learning and accessing the internet. A mapping exercise was referred to on page 136 of the report and the report indicated that a report had been concluded on this. Members were keen to understand what the mapping exercise report contained and how the authority intends to include those that are currently digitally excluded.

Officers confirmed that there is funding available under the SPF support scheme for social care to provide support to those that are digitally excluded. Officers confirmed that they would seek further information from social care colleagues to find out how that funding is being used in the community to provide support for those digitally excluded.

Members considered the action plan. However, it is not clear who is owning the actions and what other plans contain additional actions related to the plan. Officers confirmed they do have a record of which officers supplied each action. Officers confirmed they would add the posts of the person responsible for each action. Member queried, if the action was contained within another plan or document, if this could also be referenced. Officers confirmed this would be done.

Members considered the neurodivergence policy referred to in the plan. Officers confirmed the tracking of the policy sits within the Strategic Workforce Plan. All employment actions will be tracked as part of this process. A full review will be carried out on the delivery plan at the end of the year. As part of this, the review will determine if the action has been carried out and what are the impact of the actions. The report will consider if the policy has had the intended effect and if not, how policy can be improved to do this.

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

(c) **Annual Governance Statement 23/24**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers confirmed that the Annual Statement has been brought forward to support the Council's draft statement of accounts for 23/24. The main body of the report covers processes, policies and strategies that the Council have in place to ensure robust governance.

The reports sets out the progress that has been made on areas of improvement which were identified in the 22/23 statement. The improvement areas which will be taken forward in this financial year have also been identified.

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

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

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

5. **Performance Monitoring**

Members considered performance monitoring items as set out in 5a, 5b and 5c of the agenda pack.

(a) **Revenue Budget Monitoring Outturn 2023-2024**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members queried the fostering underspend of £253k as set out on page 279 of the agenda pack. It was confirmed by officers, that when the budget is set, the figure is set in accordance with expected foster placements for the year. The figure set out in the report refers to

inhouse foster placements. The number of placements during the year has decreased, therefore the figure related to this item has also decreased. The cost relates to the number of placements, not the number of carers.

Members queried the underspend on free school meals of £238k. Officers confirmed that when the budget was set, the grant funding which has been received towards this cost was not included. The grant funding was not known at the time of setting the budget, therefore could not be included until it was confirmed.

Members queried the temporary management and administrative budget overspend in relation to Margam Country Park. Members understood that there was going to be consideration to try and increase income in relation to the park. Members queried what work had been done on this. In relation to Celtic Leisure, members queried what had caused the administrative overspend? Officers confirmed that they did not have the information in relation to this item and confirmed that they would obtain the information and circulate as required.

Members referred to the overspend in relation to the unachieved vacancy management savings in the Social Services budget. Member were concerned that this is used as a mechanism in the budget, however it appears that it is not being achieved. Officers confirmed that each directorate has been given a 5% vacancy management target. This has been achieved across the Council, albeit this may not be reflected in individual directorates.

Members referred to the overspend of £209,000 in the Social Services budget, in relation to the system that was implemented which was going to be funded from reserves. Officers confirmed that the authority did hold sufficient reserves to pay for the new system and that the overspend indicted is a presentation issue within the report.

Members referred to the council tax collection rate and it was acknowledged that the council has collected more than it budgeted for. Members were concerned that this was not accurately forecast and queried if any action would be taken to ensure that the council tax income forecast was accurate moving forward. Officers advised that this would be considered when the rate is set in November, however there were a couple of items to note in relation to this. Firstly, that there is current uncertainty in employment for the

forthcoming year, within the borough and also the forthcoming year will see the premiums on second and long-term empty homes introduced. These may have an impact on the collection rate.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(b) Capital Budget Monitoring Outturn 2023-24

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

In relation to the levelling up fund, members noted that there was no reference to the Port Talbot and transport project. Members queried if there had been any funding spent in relation to the project.

Officers confirmed that there has been a limited spend on projects, in particular the Port Talbot project. In relation to the bridge project, it was confirmed that the authority are still waiting for the offer letter. It is likely that the recent general election has caused a delay in certain items from central government.

Members referred to the overall capital budget, and expressed their confusion with regards to how certain items outlined within the report fall under a capital budget. The council's website provides some narrative in terms of what falls under the capital budget however the report outlines some items which fall under it which members consider do not fall under the definition of capital budget. The example of free school meals was considered. Member suggested that there should be more of an explanatory comment outlining what investments are.

In relation to Free School Meals grants that are received and identified in the capital budget, officers confirmed these tend to relate to the infrastructure projects i.e. new school kitchens, which are being funded by the grants.

Members noted their concern where the report referred to 'other investment.' This does not clearly identify what the funding relates to. Officers acknowledged this concern and agreed to provide further detail in future reports.

Members queried, given the significant underspend of the £6.156m of the Capital Programme for 2023/24, what lessons have been learned concerning the planning and execution of capital projects and will

these lessons be used to inform future projects and capital project timelines to ensure an increase in accuracy in forecasting. Officers noted that there were often third parties involved in projects, and the authority cannot control the actions of the third parties. It was considered that the authority has good methodology in terms of capital project management, but there are often delays in grants and supplementary grants coming being received by the authority.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(c) **Treasury Management Outturn 2023-2024**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members referred to the Bank of England interest rates, and queried that when they change does the authority follow a set formula in terms of investment and borrowing or is the authorities response to the change determined by a decision of Cabinet? Officers confirmed that the authority has treasury advisors who monitor interest rates and will provide appropriate advice for the authority to consider with regards to future projection of interest rates.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(d) **To resolve to exercise the powers set out in Section 35 of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 being the designated Overview and Scrutiny Committee for this purpose as approved by Council May 2015.**

Resolved: To exercise the powers set out in Section 35 of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 being the designated Overview and Scrutiny Committee for this purpose as approved by Council May 2015.

6. **Neath Port Talbot Public Services Board - Well-being Plan Annual Report 2023-24**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members noted the Annual Report.

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

Officers went through the Forward Work Programme updates.

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

8. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON

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