

No.

CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 18th December, 2024.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

The recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor J. Protheroe (Chair); Councillor E. Goodjohn (Vice-Chair); Councillors G.D.D. Carroll, P. Drake, R. Fisher, C.P. Franks, S.M. Hanks, Dr. I.J. Johnson, B. Loveluck-Edwards and N.J. Wood.

ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chair read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE –

This was received from Councillor H.C. Hamilton.

MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 20th November, 2024 be approved as a correct record, subject to it being noted that under Declarations of Interest Councillor Franks advised that he was a member of the Friends of Seel Park and not a Trustee.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations of interest were received.

Q2 SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT 2024/2025 (REF) –

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development advised Committee that the report detailed the sickness absence figures for the period 1st April to 30th September, 2024. Absence figures had increased slightly based on the same period as the previous year but had improved on figures for 2022/2023.

The Head of Service drew Members’ attention to a number of initiatives as identified in paragraph 2.1 of the report that had been introduced by the Council to manage the key drivers in tackling presenteeism. The Council considered it very important that staff were given the support they required and were working with colleagues within

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the Health and Safety, Occupational Health and Organisational Development and Learning sections to support staff. Support was also provided to staff if required via the Westfield Health Service with a 24 hour advice line available for staff. This service had previously been provided by Care First, however due to a number of issues the Council had negotiated a new contract with Westfield Health.

In commenting on the report, the Chair advised that it was good to note that the "Other" category was going to be removed from the current list of categories as she felt it was an inconsistent term that was being used.

With regard to issues relating to mental health, Councillor Carroll enquired as to whether the reference referred to all mental health issues. The Head of Service advised that this was not the only descriptor, there were also neurological mental health illnesses, however she further said that the Department was considering broadening the category being aware that a number of employees could only tick the category as stress which was therefore not capturing the accuracy of the information.

Councillor Dr. Johnson enquired as to whether the descriptors that were being used were NHS descriptors and whether benchmarking could be undertaken with other Local Authorities. He also said that although a significant amount of statistical information was contained within the report, he wanted to ensure that this was being assessed to ensure that people were in work and healthy. Councillor Dr. Johnson also enquired as to why there were fewer absences in the month of August with the response that this was because of schools, and as they were not open at this time it impacted broadly on the statistics. The Head of Service stated that she would be looking at long term and short term absence going forward, in particular with regard to schools, and the timeliness of reporting long term absence. Councillor Dr. Johnson further enquired as to whether it would be worthwhile asking the WLGA to support the Council in providing information and advice regarding a consistency of approach in collecting data across the 22 Welsh Local Authorities to ensure that all were analysing in the same way. The Head of Service said she would be happy to refer the suggestion to the WLGA for consideration.

Councillor Loveluck-Edwards in commenting on the statistics said that in her view it was about focusing on what the stresses in the workplace were and how the Council could assist staff. With regard to musculoskeletal illnesses, there was a high percentage of linked absences and she enquired whether the age profile had been taken into consideration and how they were referred to Occupational Health. In response the Head of Service said that the levels of stress were referred to the Occupational Health Team and the Health and Safety and Wellbeing Team were developing action plans and stress risk assessments. Following a query regarding referrals to physio, it was noted that the Occupational Health Team worked with GPs who actually made the referrals.

Councillor Wood in referring to the numbers being fairly inconsistent and being up and down throughout the year suggested that a Working Task Group be set up to look into the matter further and to identify solutions in order to make a detailed impact. The Head of Service in response said that a Task Group had been established and although all were aware that it was a difficult nut to crack effort was certainly being made.

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In conclusion Councillor Carroll, said that it was important that the Council understood exactly what was keeping people out of work and drew attention to the UK Government's policy about getting people back into the work place.

Having considered the report, it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T Cabinet be informed of the following recommendations of the Committee:

- (1) That the results of the review being undertaken by the Council's HR Business Partner Team (which includes the Health and Wellbeing Team) be reported to the Committee in six months' time;
- (2) That an update report relating to the effectiveness of the Westfield Health Service be provided to the Committee in six months' time;
- (3) That further updates be provided to the Committee relating to options to align the descriptors for reporting sickness with NHS descriptors and that the Welsh Local Government Association be asked to support a piece of work being undertaken with regard to a consistency of approach across all Local Authorities in Wales.
- (4) That statistical data and age-related information relating to musculoskeletal absence be detailed in a further report to Committee and costings be included for physio provision by the Council where it may be considered appropriate.

Reasons for recommendations

(1-4) Having regard to the contents of the report, discussions at the meeting and for further consideration by the Committee.

QUARTER 2 REVENUE MONITORING 2024/25 (DCR) –

Having regard to recent announcements in respect of the Welsh Government budget settlement, further work was being undertaken in relation to budget proposals, however the report was seeking the Scrutiny Committee's approval for the 2024/25 revenue budget to be noted. The Head of Finance / Section 151 Officer advised that there was a significant volume of pressures in-year across services including schools, Additional Learning Needs and Social Services in both Adult and Children Services. Other pressures included highways resurfacing, market forces for HGV drivers and some lag on the implementation of savings across the year 2023/24 and 2024/25. In the context of these pressures additional drawdown from service reserves would be required in the year over and above the £1m that had been set aside as part of the 2024/25 budget for budget risk. The table at paragraph 2.6 of the report detailed the original budget and reflected any requested virements. A supplemental monitoring report was to be published for the next Cabinet meeting which Members would be able to see once the agenda had been published.

Councillor Franks, commenting on the report, said that it was a detailed report but he had concerns regarding the unplanned use of reserves and in his view Cabinet should have been aware of these some time ago. He was concerned about the

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consultation exercise when in his view the figures were completely out of kilter and he asked that realistic budgets be put forward in future. The Head of Service said that the pressures on the budget, particularly with regard to Social Services, had not eased as much as had been expected with some provision being extraordinarily expensive and the Directorate had to rely on external providers.

Having regard to the savings programme it was noted that only 70% of the programme had been delivered but the Council was reviewing the programme on a regular basis. In response to a query re the proposals for the Docks Office this had been dependent on the Levelling Up Bid with the Council having recently received information that funding would be available in the New Year.

Councillor Dr. Johnson raised concerns in relation to the 37 schools with a deficit budget being concerned about the impact on schools having regard to the devolved nature of the way budgets were managed. He was aware that the Social Care and Corporate Landlord pressures had been around for some time and that there were a significant number of older people in the Vale which was on the increase and would continue to increase. He enquired whether the Director of Social Services and the Director of Learning and Skills would be willing to come to the Scrutiny Committee to speak about their challenges, in particular the Director of Social Services with regard to the depth of detail in relation to the issues affecting Social Services. The Head of Service said he appreciated the Member's concerns, acknowledging that it was frustrating, however he said a number of factors had impacted on the budgets. With regard to Social Services there was good data coming through but the challenge was trying to understand the numbers that would require care and in particular those with complex needs.

The Chair, aware that the Committee could be encroaching on the remit of other Scrutiny Committees was happy to request that a report in relation to the Social Services budget and the impact and data available be provided to the Committee to understand the issues. In also referring to the procurement process, the Chair suggested that savings targets be set for any future contracts and that the Council consider outlining in any tendering or retendering process the budget that was available in order for the organisations who intended to tender to understand what budget the Council was working within.

Having fully considered the report, it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the position with regard to the Authority's 2024/25 Revenue Budget be noted.
- (2) T H A T the Revised Budget 2024/25 set out as part of the report be noted.
- (3) T H A T an update report in respect of the work being undertaken by the Education Department Task and Finish Group regarding procurement, agency work costs and funding support for ALN provision be presented to the Scrutiny Committee.

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(4) T H A T the Director of Social Services be requested to provide more detail relating to the costs of social care and any social care benchmarking that is available for the Committee to consider.

(5) T H A T Cabinet be recommended to consider that savings targets be set for procurement exercises.

(6) THAT Cabinet be recommended to consider that the maximum budget the Council has available for a procurement exercise be shared with bidders, making it clear in the Invitation to Tender that the maximum budget cannot be exceeded

Reasons for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

(3&4) In order to apprise Committee in order that they can consider further suggestions as required.

(5&6) To assist the budget setting process and to set saving targets for contracts.

CAPITAL MONITORING FOR THE PERIOD 1ST APRIL TO 30TH SEPTEMBER 2024 (DCR) –

The report provided an update on the progress of the Capital Programme for the period 1st April to 30th September, 2024. The details for all schemes were shown in Appendix 1 to the report. Appendix 2 to the report provided a summary of the position of the Capital Programme by Directorate with the report further setting out any requests in changes to the 2024/25 and future years' Capital Programme. It was noted that many areas were continuing to experience an increase in costs associated with the delivery of schemes, tenders were being received over the current allocated budgets and officers were reporting the requirement to renegotiate submitted tenders. Schemes would of course be closely monitored over the coming months with it being anticipated that slippage requests would be requested in future reports.

Councillor Goodjohn enquired as to the reasons for the delay in respect of the work proposed for St. Richard Gwyn with the Head of Service advising that he would obtain the detailed information and advise Members accordingly.

Having regard to the procurement framework and its core purpose, Councillor Dr. Johnson also enquired as to the delay with regard to the development of schools and the rationale for such. The Head of Service said that where there were a significant number of large schemes if any had to be rescheduled there was a significant impact on the development of the schemes. He said he would look into the issue with regard to both St. Richard Gwyn and the new procurement framework and advise Committee accordingly.

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Following a query from Councillor Drake regarding the security of the St. Richard Gwyn site, the Head of Service said he would obtain the information and advise Members accordingly.

The Chair enquiring as to the approach that had been undertaken in regard to potential costs and increases in costs was informed that the property team undertook a significant amount of work during the school breaks working with cost consultants in order to have a good idea of the implications and costs.

Having regard to the report and discussions at the meeting, it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the progress made on delivering the 2024/25 Capital Programme within the remit of the Committee be noted as contained within Appendix 1 to the report.
- (2) T H A T the use of Delegated Authority within the remit of the Committee, as set out in the report, be noted.
- (3) T H A T the use of Emergency Powers within the remit of the Committee, as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report, be noted.
- (4) T H A T the changes to the 2024/25 Capital Programme and future years' Capital Programme within the remit of the Committee, as set out in the report, be noted.
- (5) T H A T a further report be presented to the Scrutiny Committee on why the new procurement framework had delayed the scheme at St. Richard Gwyn.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1-4) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.
- (5) In order for Committee to understand why the delay had occurred and the impact of the delay.

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2025/26 TO 2029/30 REFRESH AND UPDATE (REF) –

Cabinet had referred the report to all Scrutiny Committees for their consideration in order to review the work in mitigating the cost pressures. In presenting the report, the Head of Finance / Section 151 Officer said that the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan existed in order to ensure resources were aligned to deliver the Council's Corporate Plan which was currently being revised for 2025 – 2030 and was subject to consultation. The Corporate Plan set out what the Council was seeking to delivery by 2030 and the Council's Reshaping Programme was the means by which the Council needed to transform to deliver the Plan in the context of the Medium Term Financial Plan.

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The Head of Finance mentioned that there had been some financial announcements in the previous few weeks and the Department was working through the figures that had been received. It was slightly more complicated than in previous years as the settlement referred to two stages – grant transfers and the 2025/26 settlement. The Vale had received a 3.4% increase with all Councils in Wales receiving a range of percentage increases.

Councillor Carroll enquired as to what the increase in National Insurance contributions by employers would mean for the Authority, with the Head of Service responding that at the moment the impact was unknown, with Committee being informed that the UK Treasury had said they would not confirm anything until April / May 2025. This he said was a concern for the Council but it was an area that could not be resolved by itself.

Following a query as to whether any modelling had been done with regard to impact, the Head of Service said modelling was currently being undertaken with the aim that it be finalised to be presented to Cabinet and Committees in January 2025.

Having regard to the need for additional Coroner support each year, Councillor Dr. Johnson enquired as to the detail for this, with the Head of Service advising that unfortunately every year the Coroner's costs had outstripped the inflation rate with it being a matter that the Council had no control over. Following a query as to whether the figure of £7.3m was correct, the Head of Service advised that the details of the settlement had not been able to be outlined within the report but that they would be presented in the January report, although he could advise that the figure of £7.3m was indeed correct.

There being no further queries, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the Medium Term Financial Plan and the work undertaken in mitigating the cost pressures be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the reference, report and discussions at the meeting.

INITIAL HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET REVISED BUDGET 2024/25 AND PROPOSALS 2025/26 (REF) –

Cabinet had referred the report to the Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee for consideration, with the suggestion that any recommendations from that Committee be forwarded to the Corporate Performance and Resources Scrutiny Committee as the lead Scrutiny Committee. The Homes and Safe Communities Scrutiny Committee had recently met and considered the referred but had not made any recommendations for the Corporate Performance and Resources Scrutiny Committee to consider. In presenting the report the Head of Service in the first

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instance drew attention to Table 4 on page 7 of the report advising that the years should have read “original budget 2024/25” and “revised budget 2024/25”.

The report outlined that the revised budget 2024/25 had increased from a surplus of £77k to £667k which would see a contribution into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) reserves. The report also detailed the revised budget for 2024/25 with initial proposals for the 2025/26 budget.

Having regard to housing repairs, Councillor Dr. Johnson enquired as to whether the Council was helping more people or doing more work and sought an explanation into exactly what Capital Expenditure Revenue Account (CERA) was and how it worked. With regard to repairs, the Head of Service said that this was a mix, there were some cost and volume increases and the Department was working on the capital finance charges, procurement treasury strategy and the HRA with an attempt to have all of these areas working in sync. CERA related to capital expenditure funded from revenue which had to be accounted for through the Capital Programme. By way of example in referring to repairs and maintenance the Head of Service advised that a broken window would be revenue and a replacement window would be capital.

Having regard to Table 2 at paragraph 2.5 of the report the Chair in referring to the funding in respect of land sales / Capital receipts(CR), asked for further detail on what the land was and requested that the information be provided by email to all Committee Members.

It was subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the Initial Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget revised budget 2024/25 and proposals 25/26 be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having considered the report and in noting that no recommendations had been referred to the Committee for consideration from the Scrutiny Committee Homes and Safe Communities.

ANNUAL DELIVERY PLAN MONITORING REPORT: QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE 2024/25 (DCR) –

The Director of Corporate Resources advised that the report presented progress at Quarter 2, 1st April to 30th September, 2024, towards achieving the Council’s Annual Delivery Plan 2024/25 commitments as aligned to its Corporate Plan Wellbeing Objectives. A Quarter 2 performance snapshot for the current Annual Delivery Plan 2024/25 was detailed at Appendix A to the report with slides 2-7 of the presentation providing a performance summary of the Annual Delivery Plan at Quarter 2, and slides 8-14 providing a Committee specific overview of progress against the Annual Delivery Plan priorities aligned to the remit of the Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that overall the Corporate Plan was being reported as a Green status with only 6 actions being identified with a Red status. Following a previous recommendation by the Scrutiny Committee the report now also listed the exceptions.

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Councillor Dr. Johnson enquired as to why the sewage issue in Marcross was still ongoing as he said it had been ongoing for a number of years. The Director said he would look into the matter and provide the information to Committee Members by email.

There being no further queries on the report, it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T the Quarter 2 performance results and progress towards achieving the Annual Delivery Plan 2024/25 commitments as aligned to the Council's Corporate Plan Well-being Objectives within the remit of the Committee be noted.

(2) T H A T the remedial actions to be taken to address areas of underperformance and to tackle the key challenges identified within the remit of the Committee be noted.

Reason for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.