

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the hybrid meeting held on 21 November, 2023

- PRESENT:** Councillor Douglas Fowlie (Chair)
Councillor Geraint Bebb (Vice-Chair for this meeting only)
- Councillors Aled M. Jones, R. Llewelyn Jones, Llio A. Owen, Keith Roberts, Ieuan Williams, Sonia Williams.
- Co-opted Member: Mr John Tierney (The Catholic Church)
- Portfolio Members**
- Councillors Llinos Medi (Leader and Portfolio Member for Economic Development), Neville Evans (Portfolio Member for Leisure, Tourism and Maritime), Carwyn Jones (Portfolio Member for Corporate Business and Customer Experience), Nicola Roberts (Portfolio Member for Planning, Public Protection and Climate Change), Dafydd Roberts (Portfolio Member for Education and the Welsh Language), Dafydd Rhys Thomas (Portfolio Member for Highways, Waste and Property), Robin Williams (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Member for Finance).
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Chief Executive
Director of Function (Resources)/Section 151 Officer
Director of Function (Council Business)/Monitoring Officer (for item 3)
Director of Social Services
Head of Regulation and Economic Development (for item 3)
Head of Adults' Services
Head of Housing Services
Head of Democracy (DS)
Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation
Scrutiny Manager (AGD)
Committee Officer (ATH)
Webcasting Officer (FT)
- APOLOGIES:** Councillors Dyfed Wyn Jones, Jackie Lewis, Arfon Wyn, Gary Pritchard (Portfolio Member for Children, Youth and Housing Services), Gillian Thompson (Co-opted Member as Parent Governor for the primary schools sector), Mr Rhys H. Hughes (Deputy Chief Executive)
- ALSO PRESENT:** Elin Allsopp (Scrutiny Officer)

In the absence of Councillor Dyfed Wyn Jones, Vice-Chair, Councillor Geraint Bebb was elected to serve as Vice-Chair of the Committee for this meeting only.

1 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declaration of interest was received.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee held on 19 September, 2023 were presented and were confirmed as correct.

3 MONITORING PERFORMANCE: CORPORATE SCORECARD Q2 2023/24

The report of the Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation incorporating the Corporate Scorecard for Quarter 2 2023/24 was presented for the Committee's consideration. The scorecard report portrays the current end of Quarter 2 position against matters relating to customer service, people and financial management and performance management.

The report was presented by Councillor Carwyn Jones, Portfolio Member for Corporate Business and Customer Experience as conveying a positive picture of performance overall at the end of the second quarter of the 2023/24 financial year with 91% of the performance indicators performing above or within 5% tolerance of their targets. A number of areas where indicators have performed well were highlighted including in relation to waste management, highways, Adults' Services and Children's and Families' Services, and homelessness. Although a full analysis of the corporate health performance indicators for the quarter had not been possible, the majority (67%) of the indicators with available data against targets monitored in this section are performing well and are ragged Green or Yellow. With regard to days lost to absence per FTE, the Council's performance is Red with 4.21 days lost to absence per FTE against a target of 3.82 days mainly due to long-term sickness which equates to 62% of the absence rate for Quarter 2. Areas showing as underperforming in relation to the average days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities grant and the turnaround of lettable units of accommodation in Housing Services and the percentage of planning appeals dismissed are being monitored by the Leadership Team to secure improvements into the future as is the number of FOI requests responded to within timescale because of the lack of available data for the second quarter for this activity. The financial position continues to be challenging with a budget overspend being forecasted for the year end.

In assessing and scrutinising the performance for the Council's key indicators at the end of the second quarter of 2023/24, the Committee challenged the Portfolio Members and Officers on the following matters –

- Accepting that 91% of the Authority's performance indicators either exceed or are within 5% tolerance of their targets at the end of Quarter 2, assurance was sought that the remaining 3 underperforming indicators will improve. Additionally, it was noted that approximately 12 PIs that are currently showing as Green are trending downwards and it was queried whether this was a cause for concern.
- The absence of any indicator to denote progress with addressing climate change and the Council's commitment to becoming a net zero organisation by 2030.
- Noting that there continues to be a reported projected overspend on the Council's budget at the end of Quarter 2 the Committee sought clarification of the measures being taken to manage budget pressures.
- That the scorecard reports an increase in the average days lost to absence per FTE. The Committee wanted to know what actions are being pursued to bring the performance of this indicator back on target and whether Covid-19 was still a factor in sickness absence.
- The actions being taken to minimise the impact of the continuing underperformance of PI 36 (the percentage of planning appeals dismissed)

Officers and Portfolio Members responded to the points raised by providing assurances as follows –

- That the scorecard for the end of Quarter 2 is highly positive considering the challenging circumstances both from the perspective of the Council's workforce and the Island's communities. However, the three Performance Indicators that are shown as underachieving in relation to Disabled Facilities grants, the turnaround of lettable units of accommodation and planning appeals are reviewed by the Leadership Team on a quarterly basis and are discussed with the relevant Heads of Service to ensure that these areas are given specific attention. All the indicators are distinct with some being within the Council's control and others capable of being influenced by the Council with market conditions and capacity also being factors. The number of planning appeals is small with two out of three appeals in Quarter 2 having been dismissed added to the two out of five appeals dismissed in Quarter 1. The slippage in turning around lettable units of accommodation is due largely to the extent of the work required to bring properties back to WHQS standards with some in need of major works before they can be re-let which take time to complete. The delivery of Disabled Facilities grants can be a complex process and is dependent on the number of care plans coming through the system and the nature of the adaptations needed with the simple installation of handrails for example being treated in the same way as installing a new bathroom for recording and reporting purposes. The Leadership Team continues to encourage and support improvement in the performance of these indicators whilst ensuring that the quality and level of performance of all the other indicators is maintained. The Leadership Team is also increasingly focusing on the direction of travel of performance indicators and is monitoring those indicators where the trend is downwards.
- That the current scorecard is largely historic in that it charts the progress of performance in line with the priorities of the previous Council Plan. A new Council Plan for 2023 to 2028 has since been adopted and a new scorecard is in development that will reflect, and link in with the six strategic objectives of the new Plan which include responding to the climate change crisis and becoming a net zero council by 2030. The aim is to commence formal reporting on the new scorecard in Quarter 1 of the 2024/25 financial year. Members will be kept informed of the progress of this process with a view to their having sight of and input into the new scorecard in Quarter 4 of the current year. The Council is also committed to reporting annually on its journey to becoming net zero by 2030.
- That the £368k projected overspend on the Council's 2023/24 budget is not overly significant in the context of a net annual budget of £175.5m. Whilst the level of overspend has reduced from that forecasted in Quarter 1, the approaching winter months may impact on expenditure as adverse weather and colder conditions could drive demand upwards as well as affecting roads and other infrastructure. The services most under pressure are Adults' Social Care and Children's' services and although the position of the former has improved, the deficit in the Children's' services budget is forecast to increase by year end with expenditure in both areas being heavily influenced by the nature, number and cost of care packages and placements. Any overspend will be met from the Council's balances which in turn will reduce the options with regard to the 2024/25 budget. Whilst the aim is to manage expenditure and to keep over expenditure to a minimum doing so in practice is difficult as the Council has commitments which it cannot change mid-year. Although services have been advised to review non-essential expenditure and to defer new

expenditure and appointments to vacant posts where possible no formal directive in that respect has been issued to date.

- With regard to improving attendance and managing sickness absence whilst the target for 2022/23 has been retained for 2023/24 it now also includes Covid related absences which inevitably have an impact on the statistics. Managers and Heads of Service are committed to applying sickness absence policies which has led to a figure not reflected in the current report whereby the number of long-term sickness absence cases has reduced; this is an ongoing process as the winter months has historically proved challenging in terms of sickness absence. Additionally it needs to be noted that 30% of long-term sickness absence cases are acute and involve medical interventions. A range of support measures are in place to help staff return to work and these include occupational health, counselling and physiotherapy services which are accessed via the Council's internal processes. In Covid cases many staff are able to continue their work from home unless they are frontline staff whose work involves contact with vulnerable clients. The Council compares well with other councils currently with regard to the number of Covid cases. It is a matter of continuing to apply the policies and utilising the measures available to help staff return to work.
- That in relation to the percentage of planning appeals dismissed it is important to set the data within context which is three appeals for the second quarter from over 300 planning applications. Whilst the performance of the indicator has improved there will always be some variation due to the nature of the appeals process. Appeal decisions will continue to be scrutinised and monitored for any emerging patterns that require a different interpretation of policies. A programme of training for the Planning and Orders Committee's members is also planned.

In discussing the underperformance of Indicator 29 (the average number of calendar days to let lettable units of accommodation excluding DTLs) it was proposed by a member of the Committee that a task and finish group be established from among the Committee's members to review the performance of this indicator in greater depth than the Committee's schedule allows with a specific view to improving performance by reducing the number of days taken to re-let void properties and to report back to the Committee on the findings. A number of online sources were cited where the turnaround of void properties was shown to be more efficient and where improvements had been successfully achieved, and it was suggested that lessons could be drawn from such sources as well as from other local authorities in this regard. It was further proposed that in parallel with the above an officer group undertake a task and finish project with regard to Indicator 28 (average number of calendar days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities grant) to analyse the underperformance for this indicator and report back to the Committee in March 2024 with proposals for improvement. Both proposals were seconded and were subsequently supported by the Committee.

The Chief Executive advised that he could see no reason why the proposals could not be supported and that it was important that members be given an opportunity to have an input into and influence areas of activity where the evidence suggests that a more detailed examination might be advantageous. He further advised that given the constraints on capacity and the existing demands on scrutiny resources, the administrative arrangements in terms of whether the elected member group should sit under Scrutiny or the Programme Boards would need to be confirmed.

The Head of Democracy advised that scrutiny capacity had recently been increased and that a review of scrutiny arrangements is planned particularly in relation to the support provided to the three existing scrutiny panels to establish good practice it being therefore possible post-review that sufficient scrutiny capacity is available to support a task and finish group.

The Head of Housing Service welcomed the proposals which would allow members to gain a better understanding of the challenges in managing the turnaround time for void properties with the proviso that any benchmarking undertaken should be against local authorities in Wales as the legislation and requirements are different for local authorities in England.

Having reviewed the Corporate Scorecard for Q2 2023/24 and having noted the responses of Portfolio Members and Officers to the issues raised it was resolved –

- **To note the Corporate Scorecard report for Q2 2023/24 including the areas of improvement outlined along with the areas which the Leadership Team is exploring and investigating to manage and secure further improvements into the future in relation to FOI requests, DFGs, time taken to re-let lettable units of accommodation and planning appeals.**
- **To recommend the scorecard report and mitigating measures outlined therein to the Executive.**
- **That a task and finish group be established from among the Committee's members to review the performance of Indicator 29 (the average number of calendar days to let lettable units of accommodation excluding DTLs) in greater depth with a brief to improve the performance of the indicator by reducing the number of days taken to re-let void properties and to report back to the Committee on the findings and in parallel with the above –**
- **That an officer group undertake a task and finish project with regard to Indicator 28 (average number of calendar days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities grant) to analyse the underperformance for this indicator and report back to the Committee in March 2024 with proposals for improvement.**

4 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-28

The report of the Head of Housing Services incorporating the Empty Homes Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2028 was presented for the Committee's consideration and scrutiny.

The report and Strategy were presented by Councillor Llinos Medi, the Council's Leader who referred to the success of the previous strategy in returning 525 properties back into use since 2017. Similarly the purpose of the successor plan is to ensure that the number of empty properties is kept to a minimum and to encourage owners to bring them back into use. It sets out how the Council deals with empty properties and forms part of the range of housing solutions which will assist in achieving the objectives of the Council Plan 2023-28. The importance of working in partnership with property owners and other services in addressing empty properties was emphasised and the case studies contained within the report were highlighted by the Leader as examples of successful interventions bringing derelict properties back into use as much needed social housing.

The Housing Services Manager in reporting on the contents of the strategic plan said that empty properties are a wasted resource especially so at a time when the pressures on the housing market and rental sector are increasing. The aim through the plan is to work with and encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use preferably by negotiation and agreement but with recourse to enforcement action should that be necessary and as a last resort. The Housing Service recognises that working together with other services and agencies is the most effective way of dealing with the various aspects of empty properties and the strategic plan has been developed on the basis of partnership working. The Service also aims to draw down value by delivering financial support via Welsh Government grants and loans as well as utilising the Council Tax Premium to ensure the best use of available resources and capacity which are modest in comparison with the output of 525 properties brought back into use since 2017.

In considering the Empty Homes Strategic Plan the Committee raised the following issues –

- The challenges in encouraging the owners of empty properties in the private sector to engage with the Council.
- Noting that 77 properties have been recorded as being empty for over 10 years and 128 recorded as being empty for between 5 and 10 years, the Committee wanted to know how many long-term empty properties had been returned to use since 2017.
- The ways in which the Strategic Plan contributes to achieving the priorities of the Council Plan 2023-28
- The extent to which the Council is dependent on partners and grant funding to make the Strategic Plan a reality.
- Requested that the Committee be provided with details of the Plan's governance arrangements as regards monitoring and evaluation along with the Action Plan when issued.

The Leader and Officers provided the Committee with further advice and assurance as follows –

- That in developing the Strategic Plan a survey was sent to all owners of long-term empty properties totalling 542 properties but excluding properties in receipt of Council Tax exemptions such as properties in probate, owners receiving care elsewhere or in residential care/hospitals, and owners in detention to ascertain what incentives would persuade them to bring those properties back into use. The survey generated a response rate of 16%. The feedback from the responses to the survey has provided the Service with a number of pointers which it is working on and in many instances the initial contact whereby advice and information is provided is sufficient to initiate the process of bringing an empty property back into use. The Service also signposts empty property owners to available loans and grants and additionally the Council is one of 16 local authorities involved in a Welsh Government initiative to bring empty properties back into use. Whilst the Council endeavours to communicate with owners of empty properties, it cannot address every empty property and seeks to target the most problematic.

The Committee noted the results of the Empty Properties Survey in particular the response rate of 16% which it was felt was not a fair reflection of empty property owners wanting to work with the Council.

- That the Council has been successful in returning some longer-term empty properties back into use for example the Old Social Club in Beaumaris. However, the greatest volume of turnaround is in relation to those properties that have been empty for one to five years as a great deal of perseverance is required to work with and sometimes identify the owners of properties that have been empty for 10 years or more. Whilst the Council Tax Premium is levied on empty properties (with certain exceptions), it is likely that owners of properties that have been empty for some time will have requested the Valuation Office that they be removed from the Council Tax list due to their not being habitable as a home making it more difficult to establish ownership thereafter.

The Housing Service Manager clarified that as the Housing Service continues to work with the owners of some empty properties that have been exempted from Council Tax these have been included in the Service's statistics and those might therefore vary from the data held by the Finance Service. In response to a suggestion about increasing the premium on problematic empty properties, the Committee was advised that that would require the creation of a local policy to allow categorisation of empty homes which would need to be confirmed as permissible under current legislation.

A further question was asked about whether there was a mechanism to allow the Council to purchase long term empty homes that have been taken off the Council Tax list because of their condition assuming that their removal from the list might indicate that the owner wishes to dispose of the property which might otherwise fall into further disrepair.

The Committee was advised that one of the interventions available to the Council is to come to an agreement with the owner of a long-term empty home to purchase the property providing it is financially viable for the Council to do so. The re-development of the derelict Plas Alltran in Holyhead is an example of such an intervention.

- That the Strategic Plan contributes to achieving the priorities of the Council Plan 2023-28 in that one of the priorities is ensuring that everyone has the right to call somewhere home which need the strategic plan helps fulfil and in enabling people to remain within their local communities the Plan contributes to the opportunities to learn and use the Welsh language. Income generated from the Council Tax empty homes premium supports grants for first time buyers of empty homes and that resource is then spent within the local economy and supports local contractors and local goods. In response to a query about the Welsh language and local connection it was confirmed that due to the variety of schemes, the criteria vary with local connection being a criterion for a Welsh Government scheme as well as the Homebuy scheme with details available on the Council's website.
- That the process of regenerating empty homes is not one which the Council undertakes alone but is dependent on effective engagement with the owners of empty properties and on Welsh Government for grant and loan interventions as well as working together as services to tackle the most problematic properties.

Having scrutinised the Empty Homes Strategic Plan for 2023-28 and noted the response of Officers to the issues raised, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee resolved to recommend the Empty Homes Strategic Plan 2023-28 for the Executive's approval.
(Councillor Aled Morris Jones abstained from voting)

Action - the Committee to be provided with details of the Empty Homes Strategic Plan's governance arrangements and Action Plan when issued.

5 SOCIAL SERVICES JOURNEY REPORT

The report of the Director of Social Services which documented progress to date in Children and Families' Services and in Adults' Services was presented for the Committee's consideration. Attached to the report for information purposes was the Social Services Representations and Complaints Procedure Annual Report for 2022/23 along with the first issue of the Age Friendly Anglesey Newsletter.

The Head of Adults' Services provided an overview of recent activities and developments in Adults' Services as those were outlined in the report and reference was made to service developments with regard to Learning Disabilities Day Services and Domiciliary Care. The visit to the Anglesey Dementia Centre in Llangefni by the Welsh Government's Minister for Health and Social Care and Anglesey's becoming a member of the World Health Organisation's Network of Age Friendly Communities and Cities were also highlighted.

The Director of Social Services summarised the ongoing work in Children and Families' Services including work to become a Trauma Informed Island and to progress the Virtual School Model as well as the first year of summer activities by the Youth Service. Particular mention was made of the two awards won by Maethu Môn Cymru at the 2023 Fostering Excellence Awards with the service having been successful in the "Fostering Network Award for Kinship Carers" and the "Fostering Network Award for a Social Work Team."

In documenting Social Services activities as part of the latest progress update and journey the Director of Social Services highlighted the pressures on both Children and Families' Services and Adults' Services in the form of recruitment challenges which are not unique to Anglesey and increasing demand and complexity of needs which in turn have implications for the budgets of both services.

In reviewing the report the Committee discussed the following matters –

- Noting and acknowledging the developments to date and recognising that the upcoming winter period could prove challenging, the Committee wanted to know what the priorities for Social Services over this next period were.
- The reasons behind the increase in demand across both services and whether this is an area that might benefit from closer examination by the Social Services Scrutiny Panel.
- The deployment of agency staff from outside Wales in the Council's Cartrefi Clyd from the perspective of cost and the provision of a bilingual service.
- The provision and availability of dementia services.
- That it would have been helpful to have received feedback regarding the actions taken and improvements made as a result of complaints and comments received in the Annual Representations and Complaints Procedure Report for 2022/23.

Officers responded to the issues raised by the Committee as follows –

- By advising that Social Services in the coming months will be looking at the ways in which services for clients are provided with a view not to reduce the level of service provided but to ascertain whether services can be provided differently e.g. by greater use of technology in service delivery and by closer co-operation with partners in the Health Service to work more creatively in designing and delivering care packages. Focusing on preventative offers by utilising grant funding and developing and extending existing projects to that end will also help in reducing hospital admissions. The Service seeks to make the best use of the resources it has with one example being the pooling of Learning Disability services with Health through joint commissioning thereby making better use of staff time and leading to an improved service for individuals.
- By confirming that the demand for services has increased steadily since the Covid pandemic with many individuals more fragile in health as a result; the number of children and young people presenting with mental health issues has also risen. Additionally, people are living longer meaning there are greater numbers with health needs due to old age. Local authorities across the region are reporting a similar increase in demand for services and information is being shared and the reasons behind it are being investigated. The Director of Social Services confirmed that he would be happy for the Social Services Scrutiny Panel to examine the issue more closely.
- By clarifying that Social Services engage agency staff through a recruitment agency which manages the process for the service, and whilst the agency the service has worked with has normally recruited on a local basis that is not always possible and staff are occasionally engaged from among a wider geographical pool. The recruitment challenges in the care sector are well known and are ongoing and the service has sought to overcome these challenges through offering competitive rates of pay including for Cartrefi Clyd staff and by proactively promoting the care sector as a career pathway through Coleg Menai for example. However more work needs to be done to raise the profile of the sector and to look at innovative ways of addressing recruitment issues on a permanent basis. In the meantime agency staff are being deployed to fill any gaps in the staff rota.
- By advising that three voluntary services which support people with dementia have come together at the Anglesey Dementia Centre located at the Glanhwfa Centre in Llangefni to create a memory assessment service for those clients, and grant funding has been invested in the Garreglwyd residential home to ensure it is safe and secure for dementia sufferers. A Dementia Day Centre is located at Plas Crigyll residential care home. Social Services recognise that dementia can be a difficult and complex condition and are hoping to be able to provide further dementia care at Garreglwyd and within the community in future.

It was resolved –

- To confirm that the Corporate Scrutiny Committee is reassured that the continued progress made by Social Services is reasonable and timely.
- To recommend to the Executive that the progress and pace of improvements in Social Services are timely and adequate.

Actions:

- Social Services Scrutiny Panel to look at the demand pressures in Social Services with a view to identifying the possible reasons behind the increase.
- Director of Social Services to provide Councillor Aled M. Jones with information on the deployment of agency staff in Cartrefi Clyd homes.

6 NOMINATION TO THE SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL/CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

The report of the Scrutiny Manager requesting the Committee to nominate one of its members to serve on the Social Services Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Parenting Panel was presented for consideration. The panel's terms of reference were provided for information and to assist with the selection process. The vacancy on the Panel had arisen following the resignation of Councillor Alwen Watkin who was among the cohort of elected members representing the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on the Panel.

It was resolved to nominate Councillor Ieuan Williams to serve on the Social Services Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Parenting Panel.

7 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Scrutiny Manager incorporating the Committee's Forward Work Programme to April, 2024 was presented for consideration.

The Scrutiny Manager referred to arrangements for the Committee's January 2024 meeting and confirmed that following consultation and with the agreement of the Chair, it was proposed that two meetings of the Committee be convened in January on the new date of Tuesday 16 January (instead of 18 January) the one in the morning and the other in the afternoon whereby one meeting will be dedicated to consideration of the 2024/25 Budget and the other to the remaining scheduled items. She recommended the Forward Work Programme to the Committee with the proposed changes.

It was resolved –

- To agree the current version of the Forward Work Programme for 2023/24 subject to the amended arrangements for January 2024 and
- To note the progress thus far in implementing the Forward Work Programme.

**Councillor Douglas Fowlie
Chair**