

HOMES AND SAFE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote Meeting held on 5th October, 2022.

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

The Meeting recording is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor A. M. Collins (Chair); Councillor B. Loveluck-Edwards (Vice-Chair); Councillors J. Aviet, G.M. Ball, I. Buckley, G.D.D. Carroll, S.M. Hanks, W.A. Hennessy, M.J.G. Morgan and S.D. Perkes.

Also present: C. Ireland (Citizens Advice Cardiff and Vale Representative) and G. Doyle, V. John and H. Smith (Tenant Working Group / Panel Representatives); Councillors E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health) and M.R. Wilson (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood and Building Services).

296 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”.

297 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillor S. Campbell; and D. Dutch (Tenant Working Group / Panel Representative).

298 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 7th September, 2022 be approved as a correct record.

299 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

No declarations were received.

300 DIGITAL PROJECTS UPDATE –

The presentation was set out by the Operational Manager for Customer Relations, who explained that since 2021, Customer Relations, Web Development and Business Improvement teams had implemented the ‘GovService’ digital, cloud-based

platform, in order to replace the Council's aging Oracle CRM solution. This included the delivery of online tools and functionality not previously available to Vale residents which allowed them to do much more online while at the same time support staff to provide a better service by telephone or in person to residents also. Similarly, the investment in the NEC Housing system would provide the same type of opportunities for tenants.

Overall, the new digital platform(s) would standardise and simplify access to services across all channels, as well as help to monitor and assess what demands there were on individual services, such as how many times residents contacted the Council concerning a particular issue. This would provide valuable insight into residents' experiences of accessing Council services and create opportunities to make improvements. Although two systems were being implemented, the two project teams involved were working together to provide a 'seamless' experience for residents and tenants, in order to avoid the need for residents to have to 'jump' from one platform to another in order to access different services

The roll out of the GovService was progressing well, and the Council was on target to replace or to move all of its processes from Oracle CRM onto the GovService platform in the near future, including Housing Management, Telecare, Blue Car Badges and integration with Confirm Asset Management.

In order to ensure that services met residents' needs the Council had started a user research project, which included engagement with tenant groups in order to test and provide feedback on digital services, as well as other representatives of communities from across the Vale of Glamorgan.

One of the key benefits of the GovService platform was how easy it was to integrate with other systems so that information and updates could be passed quickly, easily and automatically between services and to Vale residents. The Council had recently successfully tested integration between the GovService platform and the new Neighbourhood Services Asset Management platform which allowed information to be displayed via online mapping, which included the status of key assets and non-asset items, i.e. street lighting, potholes and flytipping / litter. Residents would subsequently be updated in 'real-time', either through setting up an online account or via email.

In terms of upgrading the Housing and Building Repairs Systems, a multistage implementation plan had been initiated to address those systems at highest risk or which would fall out of support first, and then to move on to resident - / tenant – facing systems over the 2022-2023 period.

In addition to the above, there were a number of digital related initiatives to help tackle the cost-of-living crisis. The Vale of Glamorgan Council's Cost-of-Living Crisis Working Group had looked at the impact of the crisis on residents' ability to access and benefit from digital services. Schemes such as the National Databank were being investigated to help residents with access to the internet using free SIM cards on smart phones and tablets. The Council was committed to publishing information about Social Broadband deals and similar information on the Cost-of-Living Crisis Hub on the Council website and this had also been shared with C1V call handlers

and other frontline staff in order to disseminate to the public. Finally, there was ‘the library of things’ scheme, where residents could borrow tools, etc. at a low cost, as well as Tablet sharing services, programmes to help people with their digital skills, etc. available via the Council.

Following on from the presentation, the Committee, and others, raised the following comments and questions:

- On Councillor Aviet’s question on whether any C1V staff would be taken away from their primary role and seconded to these projects, it was confirmed that there were no plans currently to second C1V staff to the various digital projects. Should customer / resident behaviour change in how they accessed services due to the digital roll out, then the Council would look again at how C1V staff, etc. were deployed. On the Councillor’s follow up question about how easy it would be for residents to find and access services online, it was explained that testing would be undertaken with residents and other groups of volunteers in order to ensure that they could access services online quickly and easily.
- On the challenge of ensuring that residents were prepared for this change in accessing services and were made aware that services and queries could still be accessed and made via telephone or face to face, it was important to emphasise that the whole process was about improving services irrespective of how residents chose to contact the Council. The Council needed to make sure whatever way people contacted it, whether it was online, by telephone, or in person, they had a great experience.
- Regarding Councillor Hennessy’s query on how residents accessed the new platform, this could be done by residents’ setting up an online account, with a username and password. The benefits of setting up an account were that residents could track anything that they logged or reported through the account, as well as reporting other issues through it, without having to resubmit their details again. Also, the account could be set up quickly and easily, only requiring an email address for account verification to be sent and would be a single point by which residents could access other accounts / services online, such as their Council Tax or Housing Rent accounts. However, issues could still continue to be reported by residents without an account, if they so wished.
- G. Doyle (Tenant Representative) cited some initial problems with accessing their online account to report a broken streetlight, and, once they were able to report the matter online, the subsequent long wait to get this item repaired. They were informed that the delay in repair could have been due to the relevant team having to prioritise more urgent repairs and works, as well as the possibility of having to send out such jobs to external contractors or agencies. With the new online systems and the integration of these, residents could be kept better informed on the progress of such requests, with the ability to provide a timeline for repair, etc.
- Councillor Hanks referred to the need to provide a better overall experience for residents reporting issues, etc. to C1V, stating that residents should receive a reference for an issue or repair they had logged via C1V, rather than a generic email confirming receipt of their request. It was explained that under the Council’s call handling procedures, a reference should be given to

residents logging reports, etc. via their telephone call and a confirmation email sent to them. Further coaching and support would be given to call handling staff to ensure they were providing a reference on initial contact with residents and on any follow up emails sent.

- On Councillor Perkes' query on whether the scheme for lending iPads and general digital support to local communities had picked up again and recovered following the end of Covid-19 restrictions, it was explained that such schemes were, overall, undersubscribed, and the Council was looking to promote these services more through the Vale Heroes Group. Information would be provided to Committee on the relevant figures on tablet lending, etc. following the meeting. The Council would be looking to bring all of the equipment linked to these schemes together in order to share these out more equitably between those schemes that were oversubscribed from those that were undersubscribed. With the possible rise of data poverty, in tandem with the cost-of-living crisis, it was expected that demand for such services would only grow going forward.
- The Vice-Chair stated there was a need for the Council to reach out to groups, such as older persons, in order to get the 'message out there' with regards to help that could be provided to them around data poverty and access to digital services. By its very nature, such messaging needed to be both accessible offline as well online. The Operational Manager agreed, stating there was a need for the Council to work with partner agencies and third sector organisations to get the messaging out there on digital support (including via a non-digital format) as part of an overall communications plan. C1V staff and other front line Council teams or services could also be used to disseminate this advice and support around accessing services digitally to residents they came into contact with.
- Councillor Morgan also echoed the need for residents to be able to contact the Council via both digital and more traditional means, i.e. via telephone and face to face.
- The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood and Building Services was invited to speak, who referred to the need for the Council to manage public expectations when they contacted the Council to report issues such as broken street lighting, and it was imperative that the new CRM and Housing systems had built into them the requirement to inform the public of timescales for any repairs and other items they report and to manage those accordingly. They also referred to the C1V software application that residents could download in order to log a request, which also generated a reference number. They referred to the need to provide a 'strapline' on any emails sent by C1V, etc. to residents following them logging a request or requests, in order to provide context as to what the response was about, which would be particularly useful where residents had logged multiple reports or requests to the Council. Finally, they suggested that all reports logged via C1V should be 'closed' when completed and the public made aware of the progress of their reports. It was explained that these suggestions would either be taken on board or were already being addressed on the new systems.
- The Operational Manager, Public Housing Services referred to the volume of transactions and the type of transactions that Housing Services got specifically, the majority of which were described as high volume, but straightforward or simple transactions, i.e. checking a Tenant account

balance. The use of the new digital system would free up staff to deal with more complex face to face enquiries, where people needed advice or were potentially affected by homelessness or a neighbour problem. The Housing Team were involved in a number of initiatives around digital inclusivity i.e. the use of tenant and other digital ‘champions’ who went out into communities, trained individuals and supported individual tenants to improve their digital and numeracy skills. There had been a lot of work around sheltered housing schemes, such as the provision of broadband access at these schemes via grant funding. Finally, through the use of the tenant profile exercise, tenants could be identified who might benefit from the digital inclusion schemes available.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the presentation, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation regarding the Digital Projects Update be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the presentation and discussions at the meeting.

301 DRAFT VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL ANNUAL SELF-ASSESSMENT 2021/22 (REF) –

The reference from Cabinet of 8th September, 2022 was presented by the Director of Environment and Housing who firstly outlined the legislative background to this process (the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021), which in essence, was a requirement from Welsh Government (WG) for Local Authorities to look at their performance retrospectively and to ‘test’ this via an annual assessment. The legislation also required the Council in any political term to do the same assessment and use a peer / panel process (including business and voluntary sectors).

The process involved the Council self-reflecting and asking itself ‘how well are we doing?’, ‘how well are we spending public money?’, ‘how well are we run?’ and ‘how we can do better?’, with input from Elected Members and stakeholders.

He went on to outline the process itself, and how this self-assessment fitted and fed into the overall Council Business Plan process and into the Annual Development Plan (ADP) for 2023/24, as well as the individual Service Plans, etc., and the timetable for the self-assessment process itself. In addition, both the Council’s internal and external audit governance fed into the assessment as well.

In terms of emerging areas of focus for the Council, these were challenging times for the Council and its residents, with the next ADP’s focus to be on the vulnerable, issues around residents feeding and housing themselves and the impact of the war in Ukraine (i.e. handling refugees from the conflict), as well as the Council’s need to address the long-term challenges associated with Brexit, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

The self-assessment document was incomplete at this time, due to the need to collate and process the responses provided by Town and Community Councils, residents and other stakeholders recently around the Council's performance i.e. regarding the ADP. Following on from any comments and recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committees, the self-assessment would be referred back to Cabinet for their consideration prior to the final Vale of Glamorgan Annual Self-Assessment report being considered by the Governance and Audit Committee and approved by Full Council.

Following on from the presentation of the report, the Vice-Chair referred to the key issues and challenges highlighted as part of this (such as Brexit, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis) and asked whether the objectives of last year's ADP were still fit for purpose, in order for them to be considered for the new ADP, or would they require some changes or adjustments to be made to them. The Director explained that due to the very 'broad' nature of the Council's Corporate Plan, it still remained relevant, whereas the current ADP objectives and actions would require work, due to the significant challenges that had emerged over the last 12 months and the fact that this was a 12-month plan. The new ADP would therefore need to provide greater attention to the cost-of-living crisis and vulnerable residents, as well as deal more with the housing crisis, with asylum seekers, Ukrainian refugees and Vale of Glamorgan residents all looking for housing. The advantage of the ADP was that it gave the Council an opportunity every year to look at where it wanted to be in terms of its objectives, actions, tackling issues etc. and was therefore quite a fluid document, which meant it could move quickly to pick up and meet the challenges of all of the Vale's residents. The other challenge was the Medium Term Financial Plan which would be aligned to the ADP and the funding and resources the Council had available to deliver those actions as a result.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, subsequently

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the Committee's views and recommendations be referred to Cabinet for their consideration prior to the final Vale of Glamorgan Council Annual Self-Assessment report being considered by Governance and Audit Committee and presented for endorsement by Full Council, namely:

- That the key, emerging, challenges around housing and related issues within the Vale of Glamorgan are given due consideration when formulating the Council's Annual Delivery Plan and general performance priorities / areas for future focus, in order that these can be addressed effectively.

Reason for recommendation

For Cabinet to consider the comments and recommendation(s) of the Scrutiny Committee in order to help inform the Council's approach to meeting the new performance requirements.

302 REVENUE MONITORING FOR THE PERIOD 1ST APRIL TO 31ST AUGUST 2022 (DEH) –

The Operational Manager – Accountancy presented the report to the Committee, who stated that the emerging pressures during 2022/23 related to energy standing charges, the recent pay award proposal, general inflation (particularly in areas such as school transport) and cost of living and staffing pressures. Inflationary and demand pressures were being experienced across all Council services and would need to be carefully monitored during the financial year.

Currently, there was a balanced overall position and the cost pressures had been met from an underspend in the Policy Budget (due to the use of internal borrowing, thus avoiding external borrowing costs) and some drawdown of service reserves. The Council also continued to claim some sums from residual emergency hardship and Covid-19 related hardship schemes for areas such as free school meals and statutory sick pay, but these were drawing to an end.

The Council was also delivering Ukrainian funding payments, discretionary cost of living scheme carers grants and winter fuel payments.

In terms of inflationary and other financial pressures on services within the remit of the Committee, the following were highlighted:

- Council Fund Housing: reference was made to the occupying partners, vacating Cadoxton House which could cause an issue around rental income, as well as referring to the continued work within the Housing Solutions service to reduce the reliance upon hotel accommodation for homeless clients, which had been needed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and with Welsh Government funding within this area to be reduced.
- Private Housing: there were potential pressures around the Disabled Facility Grants fee income, although that was still being mitigated at the moment.

The use of reserves was also referred to (including planned usage i.e. for capital expenditure and projects, as well as unplanned usage to fund emerging overspends) and the monitoring of borrowing / borrowing costs for the Council, as well as investments made by the Council, which had seen relatively good returns due to higher interest rates.

Following the presentation of the report, Councillor Carroll referred to the measures undertaken by the Council to mitigate some of its cost pressures, i.e. the Council had pre bought its energy, but also asked about the potential cost pressures, challenges and impacts that could be felt by the Council over the next 12 months. It was explained that in the next financial year the Council would face a projected cost pressure of £3m, solely related to energy costs, which had been included in the Medium-Term Financial Plan Refresh which would be going to Cabinet shortly. That figure would be kept under review as it would be dependent on the changing circumstances around fuel costs over the year.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the position with regard to the Authority's 2022/23 Revenue Budget be noted.
- (2) T H A T the arrangements to offset the emerging overspends in 2022/23 as set out in the report be noted.

Reason for recommendations

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

303 1ST AND 2ND QUARTER SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATION TRACKING
2022/23 AND UPDATED COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME
SCHEDULE 2022/23 (CX) –

The report, presented by the Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer, advised Committee of progress in relation to the Scrutiny Committee's historical recommendations and the updated Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2022/23.

Following on from the presentation of the report, the Committee, and others, raised the following comments and questions:

- Councillor Hanks queried the status of the CCTV update on the Forward Work Programme schedule and whether this could be presented to the Committee in the near future. The Director of Environment & Housing Services stated that there had been significant movement on the replacement of the Vale's CCTV system and this had started to be monitored by the Council's partners in Cardiff. Therefore, a report would be presented to the Committee on this progress in the very near future and the Work Programme Schedule would be amended in order to reflect this.
- On Councillor Hennessy's query on any further update in relation to the uncompleted recommendation on the identification of an appropriate housing solution for the Traveller community, it was explained that work on finding alternative sites was still ongoing, with the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment to come forward over the next few months.
- The Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer highlighted to Members that the Capital Monitoring report which had been scheduled for October's Committee on the Work Programme Schedule, had needed to be moved to the next meeting in November, and asked for the Committee's approval to amend the Schedule accordingly.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the status of the actions listed in Appendices A to C to the report be agreed.

(2) T H A T the Committee's updated Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2022/23 attached at Appendix D to the report be approved and uploaded to the Council's website, subject to the following amendments being made:

- The Capital Monitoring report be moved from October to November in the Work Programme Schedule.
- The status of the CCTV Update be amended on the Work Programme to reference that it will be provided to the Committee in the near future.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) To maintain effective tracking of the Committee's recommendations.
- (2) For public information.