

RECOVERY COMMITTEE
6 JANUARY 2022

Minutes of the meeting of the Recovery Committee of Flintshire County Council held remotely on Thursday, 6 January 2022

PRESENT: Councillor Richard Jones (Chairman)

Councillors: Mike Allport, Marion Bateman, Clive Carver, Geoff Collett, David Healey, Patrick Heesom, Joe Johnson, Hilary McGuill and Kevin Rush

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor: Martin White (for Vicky Perfect)

APOLOGIES: Councillor Billy Mullin - Deputy Leader (Governance) and Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets, Councillor Paul Cunningham and Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillor Ian Roberts - Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Christine Jones - Deputy Leader (Partnerships) and Cabinet Member for Social Services, Councillor Derek Butler - Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Councillor Paul Johnson - Cabinet Member for Finance, Social Value and Procurement, Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy), Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation), Chief Officer (Education and Youth), Corporate Finance Manager, Senior Manager - Children, Service Manager - Enterprise and Regeneration, Strategic Performance Advisor, Community and Education Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officer

51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

52. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2021 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Joe Johnson and Marion Bateman.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record.

53. CORPORATE RECOVERY OBJECTIVES

The Chief Executive introduced the update on progress with the corporate objectives in this second phase of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic where the Omicron variant was starting to impact on services. Whilst the report focussed on recovery, its future emphasis was likely to be substantially impacted by the need to implement response actions throughout January and February 2022.

The overall recovery aims of the Council were as agreed previously and senior officers provided an update on each of the corporate recovery objectives within their areas of responsibility, as set out in the report.

Finance

The Corporate Finance Manager advised that a report on the implications of the Welsh Local Government Provisional Settlement would be considered by the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee prior to Cabinet submitting detailed budget proposals to Council in February. Despite the positive Settlement, an increase in the additional budget requirement would be required to meet the impacts of pay awards and the Real Living Wage along with continued extra costs and lost income arising from the pandemic following the cessation of the Welsh Government (WG) Hardship Fund at the end of this financial year. Maintaining levels of reserves would be a key consideration of budget setting for 2022/23 and for the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Councillor David Healey asked whether WG had agreed to fund national decisions such as the proposed uplift in teachers' pay. The Corporate Finance Manager confirmed that WG had been clear in advising that the impact of all pay awards would need to be met in full from within the Settlement. Councillor Ian Roberts said that recommendations had been submitted to the Minister by an independent pay review body and that the position would be carefully monitored in discussion with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

Following questions by Councillor Marion Bateman and the Chairman, the Corporate Finance Manager said that the £20.696m additional budget requirement reported in December was being reviewed in order to share an update.

Workforce

The Chief Executive spoke about the impact of changing regulations and gave examples of measures introduced to continue to support and ensure the safety and well-being of the workforce, particularly in adapting to remote working. The development of a draft protocol to support the principles of hybrid working was likely to exceed the WG aspirational target for remote working. Whilst organisational redesign was heavily influenced by technical solutions, it was important to maximise flexibility to ensure that services continued to operate effectively.

The Chief Officer (Governance) acknowledged the challenges in working from home and gave assurance of flexibility to meet the needs of employees whilst ensuring their safety.

In thanking all staff, Councillor Ian Roberts paid particular tribute to those in Social Services, Streetscene, Housing and civic amenity sites for their work over the Christmas period. This was echoed by the Chairman and Councillor Christine Jones who paid tribute to teams within her portfolio.

The Chairman asked whether teachers and support staff were included in the flu vaccination programme. Later in the meeting, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) was able to confirm that all school staff had been offered the flu vaccine and that she would remind Head Teachers at a forthcoming meeting.

Governance

The Chief Officer (Governance) reported on improved recovery rates for Council Tax and National Non Domestic Rates which had been influenced by the pandemic and the extra workload of the Revenues team in distributing WG grants. Additional capacity to work with tenants had been agreed to help address the increase in rent arrears. The update also included progress with the ongoing expansion of digital means of service delivery.

In response to comments from the Chairman and Councillor Clive Carver, the Chief Officer provided clarification on the process for remote meetings which formed part of the multi-location policy due to be considered by the Council.

Information was shared with Councillor Hilary McGuill on the Winter Fuel Support Scheme which was being managed by the Benefits team. The Chief Executive also spoke about the Council's approach to managing its own energy costs and the element of support for businesses through the UK Government.

Service Recovery/Community Recovery/Regional Recovery

The Chief Executive advised that business continuity plans had been refreshed and that priorities were now focussed on response to align with the current stage of the pandemic. A detailed report on economic recovery was included on a later agenda item. On regional recovery, the Recovery Co-ordinating Group had been reinstated to deal with the current situation and the Deeside Leisure Centre continued to be used as a vaccination centre.

In response to comments by the Chairman, the Chief Executive said that the response had been altered to reflect the Omicron variant. He also responded to Councillor Marion Bateman's point about the impact of a reduced period of isolation on the workforce and economy.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by the Chairman and Councillor Hilary McGuill.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee is assured by progress in meeting the recovery objectives.

54. CORPORATE RECOVERY RISK PROFILE

The Chief Executive presented an update on the Corporate Recovery Risk Register and Mitigations which demonstrated that risks continued to be managed well throughout the emergency situation.

The eight risks increasing in risk trend mainly related to staff absences and additional demand on services which reflected the current stage of the pandemic. Following the Chairman's comments on the availability of key workers and workforce turnover, the Chief Executive acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on individuals' life choices which was not unique to Flintshire. He made reference to the enhanced framework which had been put in place to support employees.

The Chairman proposed an additional recommendation that a communication be sent to all employees to express appreciation for their work across the organisation and the positive impact on delivery of public services. He was seconded by Councillor Hilary McGuill.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the latest risk register and risk mitigation actions within the corporate portfolios be noted; and
- (b) That a communication be sent to all employees to thank them for their hard work during the pandemic and to outline how valuable their job is to ensure public services are maintained.

55. RISKS AND ISSUES WITHIN PORTFOLIOS AND FEEDBACK FROM OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

The Chief Executive introduced the update on progress with areas of risk for each of the five service portfolios and feedback on those issues from Overview & Scrutiny Committees, as set out in the report.

Education & Youth

In summarising the main areas of risk, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided on the approach to identify levels of school resilience in approaching the Christmas break and that the switch to remote learning - in consultation with Welsh Government (WG) - had been well received by Head Teachers and the majority of parents. There was an ongoing requirement for additional grant funding to provide necessary support to address the long term impact of the pandemic on pupils of all ages. A further high risk was the ability of schools to deal with challenges such as staff absences along with legislative changes and preparations for the rollout of the new curriculum. The WG position on school examinations was being closely monitored. Preparations were underway for schools to undertake risk assessments in readiness for re-opening in January. An update on the position of all schools would be shared with all Members once the data had been collated later in the day.

Councillor David Healey thanked the Chief Officer and her team for their support to schools and Head Teachers. In response to a question on improving ventilation in schools, she said that additional funding from WG would enable the Council to assess where remedial work should be prioritised.

Following comments by the Chairman, the Chief Officer said that the rising number of children being home educated and its effects on the Local Authority's responsibilities had been discussed by the Education & Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee. On the challenges in sourcing supply staff which had increased nationwide during the pandemic, she would pass on the suggestion for WG to contact those organisations to reiterate their value to service delivery.

Housing and Assets

The Chief Executive re-emphasised the impact of the pandemic on rental income and the support available to tenants experiencing difficulty who were willing to engage with the Council. The position on homelessness presentations continued to be monitored and additional funding from WG would help to increase staff capacity and other commissioned support services. Ongoing risks with raw material resources and costs were reflected nationally.

Planning, Environment & Economy

The Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) reported that team resilience had benefitted from a successful recruitment campaign, with the exception of an unfilled vacancy within the Drainage and Flood Protection team. On the Local Development Plan, a response was expected from the Planning Inspectorate prior to the next stage of consulting on the changes.

Social Services

The Senior Manager - Children said that the main areas of service demand were due to pressures on the three local hospitals and that child protection work had increased significantly as a result of national cases raising awareness. He explained the approach to prioritising Children's Services work on a case by case basis and gave assurance that safeguarding services were being maintained, albeit with a short-term impact on good practice models. Options were being explored to increase capacity and redeploy staff to support areas under pressure.

The Chairman asked what could be done about the lack of wraparound social care and its impact on hospital discharges, which was a national problem. As with other portfolios, the Senior Manager said that some individuals had chosen to leave services to pursue alternative employment opportunities during the pandemic. A working group set up with Human Resources would look at recruitment and retention across the organisation to increase capacity and identify long-term solutions.

The Chairman said that workforce retention was clearly a shared risk across portfolios. In response to comments, the Senior Manager acknowledged that demand on Social Services was becoming more challenging and that the virus of concern would be closely monitored over the coming weeks.

In response to remarks by Councillor Hilary McGuill, the Senior Manager said that career progression opportunities were a key part of the recruitment campaign in social care. He acknowledged safeguarding concerns about the

increased number of children who were educated at home or absent from school due to Covid, as did the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) who gave assurance of close working between Education and Social Services colleagues on a regular basis and through the Corporate Safeguarding Panel.

Councillor Christine Jones commented on the effectiveness of the panel and she shared concerns about the lack of legislation on elective home education.

The Facilitator advised that a letter highlighting the same concerns raised by the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee had been sent to WG and that the response would be circulated to all Members.

The Chief Executive said that safeguarding was a shared responsibility across portfolios supported by training sessions.

In praising the work of Social Services teams, Councillor Marion Bateman asked about the number of Flintshire patients currently awaiting care packages to enable them to be discharged from hospital. The Senior Manager gave assurance that teams were working proactively to address the situation as much as possible, although numbers were increasing. He would seek an update on the current position from Susie Lunt.

Streetscene and Transportation

The Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation) provided an update on sickness absence figures which had increased since publication of the report and the impact of legislative changes on Covid testing and self-certification rules. Recruitment issues were again a factor for some areas including HGV drivers. It was pleasing to note that waste collection and recycling sites had run smoothly over the Christmas period following deployment of staff and use of agency workers. Contractor staffing issues had resulted in some disruption to the supply chain and delays with gaining regulatory approval were affecting some schemes.

The Chairman asked about the potential risk to grant funding and was informed that meetings with WG were ongoing to ascertain the position.

In thanking all the senior officers for their informative updates, the Chairman moved the recommendation and was seconded by Councillor Marion Bateman.

RESOLVED:

That the progress of the highlighted areas of risk within all five portfolios identified at earlier meetings of this Committee be noted.

56. FLINTSHIRE ECONOMY UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) introduced a report on current economic conditions in Flintshire and across the region, set in the context of the UK position. The report also summarised the governance structures in place to respond to economic recovery and work programmes.

The Service Manager - Enterprise and Regeneration explained that the report reflected the current transitional phase and reinforced Flintshire's position as one of the strongest economies in Wales. Although there had been fewer large-scale redundancies than predicted, the challenges in recruitment and retention had escalated throughout the pandemic. Two significant issues were lack of suitable sites and premises for investment and recruiting to key sectors. The regional work to support economic recovery was noted including the packages of support measures developed and awaiting funding decisions. The local group would ensure the effective co-ordination of workstreams to deliver the best impact for Flintshire. During an overview of the key schemes, it was noted that work was progressing to improve data on town centres and the outcome of the Welsh Government (WG) pilot on Town Centre Entrepreneurship Loans was awaited.

Thanking officers for the detailed report. Councillor David Healey called for the Government to provide greater incentives for businesses to take on apprentices. The Service Manager spoke about work locally and regionally to improve the flow of information to encourage learners and that as a result of the pandemic, many businesses were opening up to apprenticeship opportunities.

In response to comments from Councillor Clive Carver about the extent of digital improvements across the County including his ward, the Service Manager referred to workstreams under the Digital Strategy and the North Wales Growth Deal and would discuss further outside the meeting Councillor Carver's concerns.

Councillor Derek Butler welcomed the report in highlighting the robust economy in Flintshire and identifying issues for further improvement. He said that skill shortages and recruitment challenges were evident before the pandemic and Brexit, and that the Council should continue to make representations to WG to increase apprenticeship opportunities.

Councillors Hilary McGuill and Marion Bateman both commented that the lack of available commercial units did not encourage business expansion. In response to a question, the Service Manager provided clarification on the allocation of the latest round of grant funding to businesses and would check if there were new funding incentives to encourage employers to take on apprentices.

Councillor Derek Butler paid tribute to the work of the Service Manager and Revenues Manager and their teams in managing grant funding for businesses. He agreed with concerns about the lack of industrial units and suggested that the Council may wish to consider a build programme to meet demand.

On industrial units, the Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) clarified the Council's role in respect of land availability and gave examples of applications at various sites. He referred Members to the forthcoming Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee report on the proposed approach to bid for UK Government Levelling Up funding to increase investment in the commercial property estate.

Whilst welcoming the report, the Chairman said that it did not fully address town centres and that information on workstreams should include a timetable to monitor progress. The Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) advised that the appointment of a town centre officer would support this work.

In response to a suggestion by the Chairman on engaging with schools to address the skills shortage, officers confirmed that the matter had been identified as a strategic risk and was a priority of the Economic Ambition Board (EAB) in addition to local workstreams.

Following debate on the best approach, the Facilitator suggested that a letter be sent to the EAB to establish their plans to engage with the education sector and to express the views of the Committee, which was welcomed by the Chairman.

The Chief Executive made a further suggestion that a representative of the EAB be invited to provide information to the Committee on promoting skills with the education sector. He would liaise with the Chief Officer and Facilitator on this. The Chairman moved the additional recommendation and was seconded by Councillor Joe Johnson.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the contents and conclusions of the report be supported; and
- (b) That a letter be sent to the Economic Ambition Board to invite a representative to the 3rd March Committee meeting to outline future plans/work streams with the education sector to promote the educational/work opportunities across North Wales.

57. COMMUNITY RECOVERY UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) gave an overview of the presentation slides previously shared with the Committee on the work of the Joint Public Services Board (PSB) and progress on the four priorities:

- Mental health
- Improving our environment
- Children and young people
- Poverty and inclusion

A further update would be provided at the next meeting of the Committee.

On that basis, the report was moved and seconded by Councillors Patrick Heesom and Joe Johnson.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

58. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

As the February meeting was a provisional date set aside for any urgent business, the items agreed for the next scheduled meeting on 3 March 2022 were:

- Corporate Recovery Objectives
- Corporate Recovery Risk Profile
- Updated position statement on risks for each portfolio
- Community Recovery update
- The requested item on North Wales Economic Ambition Board, depending on the availability of those representatives

This was moved and seconded by Councillors Patrick Heesom and Marion Bateman.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That, subject to the need for any urgent business to be considered, the February meeting be cancelled; and
- (b) That the items suggested for the March meeting be supported.

59. ATTENDANCE BY MEMBERS OF THE PRESS

None.

The meeting commenced at 10am and ended at 1.10pm

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Chairman