

COUNTY COUNCIL

WEDNESDAY, 24 MAY 2023

PRESENT: Councillor R.E. Evans (Chair) (In Person)

Councillors (In Person):

S.M. Allen	K.V. Broom	J.M. Charles	D.M. Cundy
C.A. Davies	T.A.J. Davies	B. Davies	G. Davies
H.L. Davies	L. Davies	S.L. Davies	T. Davies
M. Donoghue	L.D. Evans	N. Evans	W.T. Evans
S. Godfrey-Coles	J.P. Hart	T.M. Higgins	J.K. Howell
P.M. Hughes	P. Hughes-Griffiths	M. James	R. James
G.H. John	A.C. Jones	D. Jones	G.R. Jones
H. Jones	A. Lenny	N. Lewis	K. Madge
D. Nicholas	D. Owen	M. Palfreman	B.D.J. Phillips
D. Price	E. Rees	B.A.L. Roberts	E. Skinner
D. Thomas	E.G. Thomas	G.B. Thomas	M. Thomas
J. Tremlett	A. Vaughan Owen		

Councillors (Virtually):

L.R. Bowen	M.D. Cranham	S.A. Curry	A. Davies
W.R.A. Davies	C. Davies	L.M. Davies	A. Evans
D.C. Evans	H.A.L. Evans	A.D. Harries	J.D. James
J.P. Jenkins	B.W. Jones	M.J.A. Lewis	A.G. Morgan
S.L. Rees	E.M.J.G. Schiavone	J. Seward	H.B. Shepardson
F. Walters	P.T. Warlow	D.E. Williams	J. Williams

Also Present (In Person):

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
J. Morgan, Director of Community Services
G. Morgans, Director of Education & Children's Services
A. Williams, Director of Place and Infrastructure
L.R. Jones, Head of Administration and Law
P.R. Thomas, Assistant Chief Executive (People Management & Performance)
G. Morgan, Head of Democratic Services
E. Evans, Principal Democratic Services Officer
S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator
L. Jenkins, Cabinet Support Officer
M. Runeckles, Members Support Officer
M.S. Davies, Democratic Services Officer;

Also Present (Virtually):

S. Hendy, Member Support Officer
R. Morris, Members Support Officer.

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely: 10.00 - 11.30 am

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P. Cooper, K. Davies, A. Leyshon and R. Sparks.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS

There were no declarations of personal interest.

3. PERSONAL MATTERS/OUTGOING CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Retiring Chair, Councillor Rob Evans, welcomed distinguished guests, Councillors, staff and friends to the meeting. He thereupon reflected on his year in office and the events and celebrations he had attended with his consort Councillor Nysia Evans.

The Retiring Chair expressed his gratitude to the Chief Executive, Wendy Walters, Linda Rees-Jones and Gaynor Morgan for their advice and professional guidance, and staff of the authority who had supported the work of the Chair including his fundraising for Ty Bryngwyn Hospice and Wales Air Ambulance. He had recently presented each charity with a cheque for £2,500.00. He thanked his driver Jeff Jones and Eira Evans for her professional and personal support, arranging his events and making sure that everything always ran smoothly. He paid tribute to his consort, Mrs. Nysia Evans, who had been at his side for the last 12 months and thanked her formally for her support. Finally he wished the Chair-elect Councillor Louvain Roberts and her consort, Mrs Vanessa Rees well in her year of office.

4. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE LEADER, CABINET MEMBERS AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

There were no announcements.

5. ELECTION OF CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE 2023-24 MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was moved by the retiring Chair Councillor R. Evans and seconded by Councillor J. Tremlett and UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that Councillor B.A.L. Roberts be elected Chair of Carmarthenshire County Council for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

Councillor R. Evans congratulated Councillor Roberts on her election.

Councillor Louvain Roberts made her declaration of acceptance of office and was invested with the Chain of Office.

Councillor Roberts expressed her gratitude to all Councillors for their support in appointing her as Chair of Carmarthenshire County Council and added that she was looking forward to her year in office representing the Council. Councillor Roberts also paid tribute to the retiring Chair, Councillor R. Evans, and presented him with a Past Chair's Commemorative Pendant.

Tributes to the retiring Chair were paid by Councillor Darren Price, Leader of the Plaid Cymru Group, Councillor Jane Tremlett, Leader of the Independent Group,

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and Councillor Rob James, Leader of the Labour Group. The Deputy Chief Executive, on behalf of the Chief Executive, who was unable to attend the meeting due to illness, and the Corporate Management Team, also paid tribute to the retiring Chair.

6. ELECTION OF VICE CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE 2023-24 MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was moved by Councillor D. Price, seconded by Councillor P. Hughes-Griffiths and UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that Councillor Handel Davies be elected Vice-Chair of Carmarthenshire County Council for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

Councillor Handel Davies was invested by the Chair, Councillor Louvain Roberts, with the Chain of Office and made his declaration of acceptance of office. The Vice-Chair expressed his appreciation to the Council on his appointment.

Council was informed that the Vice-Chair's Consort, Mrs Margaret Davies, was unable to be present and that arrangements would be made for the Consort's chain to be forwarded to her.

The Chair congratulated the Vice Chair and his Consort on their appointments.

7. TO RECEIVE THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2022-23

The Leader presented his Annual Report to the Council covering the period 2022/23 [appended to these minutes] and spoke of the need to reflect on what had been achieved to date and consider what still needed to be done.

The Leaders of the Independent Group and Labour Group were afforded the opportunity of commenting on the Leader's report.

RESOLVED that the Leader's 2022/23 Annual Report be noted.

8. APPOINTMENT OF MEMBERS TO SERVE ON THE COUNCIL'S SCRUTINY, REGULATORY AND OTHER COMMITTEES FOR 2023-2024

The Council considered a report detailing the proposed membership of Regulatory, Scrutiny, Other Committees and Panels.

It was duly moved and seconded and

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED to approve the appointment of members to Regulatory, Scrutiny and Other Committees as set out within Appendix 1 of the report.

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

9. TO CONSIDER NOMINATIONS RECEIVED AND TO ELECT CHAIRS AND VICE CHAIRS FOR THE COMMITTEES / PANELS OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE 2023-24 MUNICIPAL YEAR

The Council considered nominations which had been received for the appointment of Chairs and Vice Chairs of Committees for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

It was duly moved and seconded and

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the following appointments to Chairs and Vice Chairs of Regulatory, Scrutiny, Other Committees and Panels be made for the 2023/24 Municipal Year:-

<u>COMMITTEE / PANEL</u>	<u>CHAIR</u>	<u>VICE CHAIR</u>
Communities Homes and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee	Cllr. D.M. Cundy	Cllr. B.W. Jones
Corporate Performance & Resources Scrutiny Committee	Cllr. A.G. Morgan	Cllr. K.V. Broom
Education, Young People & The Welsh Language Scrutiny Committee	Cllr. C. Jones	Cllr. S.M. Allen
Place, Sustainability & Climate Change Scrutiny Committee	Cllr. K. Madge	Cllr. K. Davies
Health & Social Services Scrutiny Committee	Cllr. H.A.L. Evans	Cllr. B.A.L. Roberts
Appeals Committee	Cllr. J.K. Howell	Cllr. L. Davies
Appointments Committee A - Directors	Cllr. D. Price	Cllr. S.M. Allen
Appointments Committee B - Heads of Service	Cllr. J. Tremlett	Cllr. D. Price
Democratic Services Committee	Cllr. L. Davies	Cllr. W.T. Evans
Licensing Committee	Cllr. J.M. Charles	Cllr. D. Phillips
Member Appointments Committee	Cllr. J. Lewis	Cllr. W.R.A. Davies
Planning Committee	Cllr. W.T. Evans	Cllr. C. Jones
Housing Review Panel	Cllr. B.W. Jones	Cllr. G.B. Thomas
Dyfed Pension Fund Committee	Cllr. D.E. Williams	Not required

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10. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

The Council was reminded of the requirement for it to review its Constitution on an annual basis and that as part of that process it had established a Constitutional Review Working Group [CRWG] to present any recommended changes.

It was reported that whilst there had been no legislative changes which required changes to be made to the Council's Constitution the Council would need to confirm the constitution as it currently stood and amend Part 6.1 of the Constitution to reflect the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) prescribed amounts to be paid to Councillors for 2023-24.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 10.1 in accordance with the determinations made by the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales, to adopt the Councillors' and Co-opted Members' Salaries and Allowances Scheme for 2023-2024, as detailed within Part 6.1 of the Constitution;**
- 10.2 to adopt the change to Article 6 of the Constitution in terms of the Scrutiny of the Deputy Leader role;**
- 10.3 to adopt the Council Constitution for 2023-2024 subject to the changes to the Constitution arising from decisions made in recommendations 10.1 and 10.2 above;**
- 10.4 that the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make any minor amendments, correct typographical or drafting errors and ensure all cross-references within the Constitution are correct and that these be reported to the Constitutional Review Working Group as and when necessary.**

11. MEMBERSHIP OF THE MID AND WEST WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that Councillor R. Evans be appointed to replace Councillor K. Madge as the Labour Group's representative on the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority.

CHAIR

DATE

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APPENDIX

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2022-23

"It's hard to believe that a year has passed since we were all elected to this place to represent the people of Carmarthenshire and it's been a very interesting year. One of the first things we did as a Cabinet was to plan to put into action what this administration was voted in for and over the last year we have set strong foundations in our Vision Statement and in the Corporate Strategy to achieve this. After a year and with four more to go we can see a clear path in front of us. Today is an opportunity for me to give you an update on what's happened over the last year and what we've got to come.

Our Vision Statement was published in July last year following cross party discussions. As I said in my address at last year's AGM 'good ideas are not the monopoly of any individual or one political group' and following a year of working together I still believe that to be true. I'd like to thank all Members for their willingness to feed into our work and hope that this reciprocal approach and mature politics will continue in the years to come.

The Vision Statement remains as the roadmap of what we promised door to door last year and that is what we will be held accountable for over the coming years. The Corporate Strategy provides the framework for delivering on those commitments outlined in the Cabinet Vision Statement and detailed delivery plans that will be monitored and reviewed regularly, and will set out the exact actions we will be taking as a Council to make progress against our objectives. There are four objectives within the Corporate Strategy, and they are – Start Well, Live and Age Well, Prosperous Communities, and Our Council. I should note that we have identified also the key areas of decarbonisation, climate and nature emergencies, and the Welsh language as thematic priorities and, along with a focus on equality, we will ensure these key areas are embedded and progressed in all that we do.

Wellbeing Objective 1 is Start Well. Enabling our children and young people to have the best possible start in life, we know why this is important - the best start reduces inequalities later in life. It's imperative that we ensure that every child in Carmarthenshire has the best start in life and very often we need to invest in order to do that.

In the last year we've opened two new schools, Ysgol y Castell in Kidwelly was opened in January, a new replacement building with the capacity to deliver primary education for 270 primary school children and 30 nursery pupils, with an additional space to provide Early Years care. In December last year the brand new Ysgol Gorslas was opened, the school has the capacity to welcome and provide Welsh medium education for 210 pupils, between the ages of 4 and 11 years of age.

We are on track to deliver Universal Primary Free School Meals to all primary school pupils by April next year. We are already providing UPFSM for Nursery, Reception and Years 1 and 2 as a result of the cooperation agreement between Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Government.

It is pleasing that our Welsh in Education Strategic Plan was approved by Welsh Government last year. The plan will see more schools moving to becoming Welsh language medium over the next 10 years creating an opportunity for more learners to be educated bilingually. It includes more nursery and reception children being taught through the medium of Welsh; more young people studying for qualifications in Welsh, increasing provision for learners with Additional Learning Needs; and increasing the number of teachers able to teach Welsh and through the medium of Welsh – with continuing support to develop staff through a comprehensive and flexible training programme.

Following a difficult few years we remain absolutely committed to supporting schools in dealing with the effects of the pandemic. Some initiatives to improve attendance and behaviour within schools following covid for example have brought added focus to the situation. It continues to be a difficult time across many settings within education and I'd like to thank all staff for their continued work during a difficult time of change.

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One of the most difficult tasks for the Cabinet this year has been setting a draft budget for Council to consider. Years of austerity measures have led us to where we are - cutting, reducing, seeing whether we can slice a little bit more off a service or provision. However, in terms of cuts to education, we have tried to protect schools consistently from cuts over the past few years and we will continue to do so but each year becomes more and more challenging. I have complete confidence in our Department of Education, I know that they work their hardest to deliver the best education possible for our children, but I worry about the pressure Head Teachers and senior managers are under to continuously try and deliver more with limited resources.

Only last week the Chief Executive and I visited Children's Services in Llanelli and I am extremely proud of what the service is delivering under challenging circumstances. Our focus on preventative services and keeping families together remains a priority and as a result we have one of the lowest rates of Looked after Children in Wales. Indeed over the last year our work in this area has been noted by the First Minister and the Deputy Minister for Social Services. Members will be aware that we are currently in the middle of Foster Care Fortnight which aims to increase the number of foster carers in Carmarthenshire and they have an integral role within the Children's Services family. This morning I want to place on record my thanks to all our staff, foster carers and partners who work in this field. We are truly grateful for the work you do on our behalf.

WBO 2 Live and Age Well – Which focuses on enabling our residents to live and age well, and WBO 3 Prosperous Communities – which looks to deliver communities and environments for a healthy, safe and prosperous are central to our vision as a Cabinet.

We know that poverty and deprivation have serious detrimental effects, impacting all aspects of well-being. Over a third of our households continue to live in poverty (35.6%), a level which has increased over the last ten years not helped by Tory austerity. We know that this county continues to face a cost-of-living crisis and we remain committed to tackling this issue head on. We have new advisors in our HWBs who provide budgeting and benefit advice. £180,000 was made available from the Poverty Fund for local residents and community groups to deliver Warm Welcome Spaces, we opened our libraries in Carmarthen, Llanelli, and Ammanford as warm places as well as supporting third sector partners to deliver support in the community. We will continue to support our residents as we always do and to ensure that we are absolutely focused on this issue we've established a cross party advisory panel on tackling poverty to report to Cabinet regularly.

Earlier this year we decided to act decisively to tackle the affordable housing shortfall by introducing a premium on second homes and empty properties. The intention of introducing a premium on second homes and long-term empty houses is to either encourage greater use of these properties or ensure that their owners contribute more towards our communities. By the year 2025/26, the total premium for both classes could potentially raise anything up to £3m, as a contribution towards helping us to maintain essential services or release houses to become homes for Carmarthenshire residents, depending on the response of owners.

As you will already know, the Strategic Equality Plan is currently out for consultation. The plan sets out the principles of our commitment to equality and diversity and outlines how we intend to fulfil our responsibilities as an employer, a service provider and as a community leader. I would urge members of the public to respond to the consultation as it will help form the next Strategic Equality Plan which will run from 2024 to 2028.

I'm pleased that progress is being made in a commitment from the Vision Statement to increase the level of in-house provision within social care and rebalance the market locally. One of the cornerstones of achieving this is increasing our Social Care workforce. Significant pressures over the last few years have highlighted the need for and importance of a strong and available workforce. Last summer we launched the Care Academi which offers opportunities to those looking for a career in social work or social care. Open to all ages, the Academi provides training, support and guidance enabling candidates to earn while they learn and choose a career path that suits them best. With a blend of on-the-job training and education, there are various opportunities to explore the variety of social care and social work roles on offer. I'm very keen to see that we promote this as a career pathway in our schools and further education centres. Significant reform in improving the terms and conditions of our in-house staff and joint initiatives with the Local Health Board is making a difference with the number waiting for Homecare in hospital and the

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community now falling to pre pandemic levels. For the first time in many years, we will open our first council run Childrens home in the autumn enabling us to rebalance a market that has not served our children well.

Prosperous communities are communities where all people can thrive. Where there is employment, transport, leisure, and services that are accessible to all. Lack of qualifications and skills, transport, access to services are all barriers to economic activity. Providing secure and well-paid jobs for local people is crucial.

Our Innovation Strategy launched last week is central to that vision and it looks to identify proposals to support the recovery and restructuring of Carmarthenshire's economy through innovation. The focus of the strategy lies in the areas of Foundation Economy; Health and Wellbeing; Digital Innovation and the impact of Climate Change and the opportunities that harnessing a Circular Economy could have on the county.

In terms of the environment, it's been great to see the development of ETO at Nantycaws and Llanelli and progress on the greening of our fleet. It would be remiss of me to report on developments over the last year without referring to the significant changes to our refuse collection. In January we moved to weekly blue bag and food waste collection alongside a new kerbside glass collection service every three weeks. It is pleasing that we are already seeing positive changes in terms of recycling rates which I'm sure will be reflected against our statutory targets.

We've also seen development in terms of the sustainable food plan which supports part of the PSB work programme. Our Local Food Strategy is currently in development and out for review from PSB partners and stakeholders. Adopting a Local Food Strategy and setting ambitious targets will solidify the foundations of Carmarthenshire as the No.1 local authority area in Wales taking action on sustainable food.

In terms of Transport and Infrastructure we've worked with Welsh Government in delivering the T1 electric bus and infrastructure project with the construction of a new bus facility at Nantyci and completed the Cross Hands link road which is a key enabler for economic development around the Cross Hands strategic employment site. New Active Travel infrastructure has been constructed to support more sustainable travel and progress continues on the Towy Valley Path with the Planning application submitted and the necessary land purchasing processes underway.

Importantly we have also started work on developing a community transport strategy and continue to lobby for the delivery of the Llandeilo by-pass.

We've also continued with our commitment to build more homes in Carmarthenshire. Our new homes reflect our commitment to tackling climate change and tackling poverty. Homes on our newer sites including Glanymor Terrace in Burry Port are fitted with modern kitchens and bathrooms, they have exceptionally high levels of insulation to help minimise heat loss and are fitted with renewable technology including solar panels, electric vehicle charging points and battery storage helping to provide lower energy bills for tenants. We are committed to delivering houses designed with a greater range of measures that will reduce both energy use and carbon emissions, supporting our commitment to tackling climate change and becoming a net zero carbon local authority by 2030.

In terms of leisure, Pendine Tourism Attractor Project opened in March, and I had the pleasure of being present at the official opening. Pendine has a unique history in terms of the land speed record as well as being one of the most picturesque stretches of beach in the country. The project includes the 'Caban' - accommodation that has been constructed using sustainable building technologies. Overlooking the beach, the Caban facility includes a restaurant and will cater for the walking holiday and outdoor sports adventure market as well as those seeking a coastal experience. It's such a joy to see the development at Pendine which I'm sure will benefit both local residents and visitors to the area.

Recently members will be aware that we launched the Shared Prosperity Fund in Carmarthenshire which will provide an additional £36.68m additional investment to help deliver against some of Carmarthenshire's key strategic objectives. The Shared Prosperity Fund will

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provide new opportunities for local communities, support the development and growth of local businesses as well as supporting the recovery of our town centres and is a mix of revenue and capital funding that can be used to support communities. We've also launched the second phase of the £11 million ARFOR Programme, which aims to deliver an economic boost and strengthen the Welsh language across the counties of Gwynedd, Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, and Anglesey, and we are now inviting applications to its Enterprising Communities Fund. The second phase of this pioneering Programme comes as part of the Cooperation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru which we are grateful for.

Cabinet believe that local procurement has a significant part to play in terms of economic growth and we've tasked officers with reviewing the way our procurement frameworks work to increase the level of local procurement and supporting local businesses.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the officers for their work in supporting the Town Centre Taskforces in Ammanford and Llanelli, and the Carmarthen Town Centre Regeneration Forum together with the Ten Towns initiative and I'm of the firm view that we need to spread economic development across the county.

In Llanelli, work has started on Pentre Awel and work is progressing on the YMCA building in Llanelli, and Market Street North is due to start in the next few months. Its also pleasing to see plans being developed for other parts of Llanelli. The regeneration of Tyisha is key to the town's development, providing an important link between the town centre and the Pentre Awel project. Businesses in certain parts of Llanelli town could also benefit from the SPF Town Centre Vacant Property Fund which has been launched and is focused on bringing ground floor vacant properties back into commercial use. This fund is also available for parts of Carmarthen and Ammanford. The regeneration of Llanelli town is something that I am personally committed to. We want to make it a place where people want to live and work by bringing empty shops back into use and creating much-needed homes. I look forward to working with all partners who share that ambition.

In Carmarthen work will begin later this year at the HWB development which will house our customer service teams – offering advice and support for our residents. The Hwb will include a town centre gym, NHS facilities and various council services. It will also provide opportunities for our residents to access further and higher education through the University of Wales Trinity St Davids.

Also in Carmarthen we are continuing the Jacksons Lane development plans, including greening, outdoor seating provision for surrounding restaurants and cafes as well as space for market stalls and events. Work continues with the Oriel Myrddin development King Street.

Improvement works to Carmarthen bus station are nearing completion, and the £500k Shared Prosperity Fund Tackling Towns funding has identified 5 projects to undertake within the town. We've worked with the Carmarthen BID and Town Council to attract football and a food and drink monthly market is being planned.

In terms of Ammanford, I visited the town with members last week, and saw progress being made in terms of the Taskforce – with plans to further support the town centre and increase the number of market stalls. A 3G sports pitch and leisure facilities have added to the fantastic sporting facilities already available within the town. We have lobbied and will continue to lobby Welsh Government and regional partners to re-open the Amman Valley railway to provide services to Ammanford and to the top of the Amman Valley as part of the Swansea Bay Metro, which I believe would be a significant boost for this part of the county.

As members will be aware we have published our second draft Local Development Plan – which looks to deliver economic development and housing across the county, and also seeks to strengthen our policies around special landscape areas. The next step is to submit the Plan to the Welsh Government for examination later in the year.

Wellbeing Objective 4 – Our Council – Looks to further modernise and develop our council in a resilient and efficient way.

Earlier this year we were awarded an Investors in People Gold Award which is remarkable considering the circumstances of the last three years. We know that we can adapt as an organisation, Covid proved that, but to see our achievements recognised by Investors in People in this way was particularly pleasing.

I absolutely value the work of the Trade Unions and since becoming Leader, I have instigated a joint consultative forum where group leaders, together with Wendy, Paul and Councillor Phil

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Hughes meet with our trade unions colleagues on a quarterly basis so that key issues can be raised and discussed directly with councillors. Given the demanding financial challenges that we are going to have to face in the future, it is imperative that we work together with the Trade unions in an open, honest and collaborative way. Over the past 12 months, as members, we have worked together, and we have managed to increase the salaries of some of our lowest paid workers, including Home Carers, Residential Care Workers, Refuse Loaders and Refuse Drivers.

Our Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 endorsed the Real Living Wage supplement, as we have done over the past five years, to ensure that our lowest paid receive the equivalent of £10.90 per hour. We will continue to work with Cynnal Cymru and others to explore the possibility of consolidating our approach and becoming an accredited Living Wage Employer.

At Cabinet on Monday, we approved the Cycle to Work and Car Loan Scheme, increasing the limit and terms on the cycle to work scheme and the total loan advance on the Car Loan scheme to reflect rising costs and pressures. We've also increased the milage rate where necessary in order to support the fluctuating cost of fuel.

The next few years are likely to be equally, if not more, challenging, as external cost increases are likely to place extra strain on financial budgets. We are also likely to continue to see significant increases in demand for services such as social care in this post-Covid period, together with increases in customer expectations also heightened during the pandemic. We've launched a Transformation Strategy, a programme of change that will allow the Council to look to the future with confidence and continue to deliver our ambitions and priorities for the benefit of our residents of our county. Although the last 2 years has brought unprecedented challenges for this Council, it could be argued that the last decade has been a period of constant challenge for local government. The UK Government's decision to significantly reduce public expenditure as a response to the financial crisis of 2008 has resulted in a severe budget challenge for local government which has lasted for a period of over 10 years. The fact that we were able to continue to deliver high quality services during a period when service demands was also increasing, is testament to the innovation and creativity shown by Council staff in identifying ways to deliver services in more efficient ways and I thank them for the work that they have undertaken on this agenda.

It is absolutely clear that as a council we face many challenges as we look forward. As members, you will already have participated in the review of the Modernising Education Programme over the past few months. And although we are undertaking a review of our school footprint work continues on Ysgol Gwenllian and we are in the process of developing a solution to the proposed site of Ysgol Dewi Sant, it is a complex situation, and we are keen to work with the Town Council and the Welsh Government on that. We are also keen to find a solution for schools in the Ammanford area. It is vitally important for us to engage with members across the chamber as we develop solutions to deliver education provision across the county over the next few years.

Our road network is essential in linking communities, providing access to jobs, education, health care and services and it binds communities together. Members will be aware that Local authorities across Wales are facing a historic backlog of underinvestment in the maintenance of these key arteries and Carmarthenshire is no exception. While we have been able to keep our busiest roads in a reasonable condition, more investment is clearly required in maintaining the wider road network. Welsh Government have been unable, unfortunately, to continue the Road Refurbishment Grant which ended in 2021/22 and helped resurface our roads. This therefore provides a significant financial challenge to the authority.

Our investment in resurfacing has subsequently dropped from £3.9M in 2022/23 to £1.6M this year while tendered resurfacing costs have increased by 30% since 2020. As a consequence, we have a reduced amount to invest, and that investment doesn't achieve as much. We know that around £8 million is required each year to sustain the network in a steady state. Without a sustained investment our roads will deteriorate, and potholes will become an increasing public concern. And this is something that I am absolutely determined to tackle and again would welcome cross-party support on that.

We have around 9,500 homes under our responsibility and the scale and volume of maintaining and repairing that stock is considerable. Since the transfer of maintenance services last year the Community Services Department have worked hard this year to significantly improve the way we

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respond to housing voids and repairs as we face the inevitable backlog of work stemming from the pandemic. Focussed work has nearly halved the number of voids in the system with further improvements to come including a new scheduling system due to be fully operational by mid-2024. The Cabinet met with the Director and Head of Service in the spring, and we were very pleased with the progress made and the future plans. I hope that over the next year that you will see the positive outcomes we expect.

A significant challenge for us over the next few years is the reduction in the number of Welsh speakers in Carmarthenshire. I was very disappointed that the results of the 2021 census published earlier this year noted a reduction of 4% in the number of Welsh speakers in the county. The truth is we are seeing a decline and we need to take action quickly to prevent this. Members will be aware that earlier this week the Cabinet approved the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy for the next 5 years, a strategy to promote the Welsh language across Carmarthenshire. The aim of the strategy is to increase the number of Welsh speakers, pride amongst residents as well as the use and confidence in the use of the language and also to promote the language as a norm in the workplace and within the workforce and create Welsh prosperous communities.

We have indeed achieved a lot during the last year under very challenging circumstances. We will continue to deliver our Vision Statement over the next year and I am sure there will be new challenges ahead for us as well. But our aims are robust and we have a clear strategy as to how we will achieve these aims.

I would like to thank the Cabinet and my fellow members across the chamber for their support over the year and also to the Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team for their advice and to all council officers and staff for all their hard work during the last year.”

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