

COUNTY COUNCIL

WEDNESDAY, 11 OCTOBER 2023

PRESENT: Councillor B.A.L. Roberts (Chair) (In Person)

Councillors (In Person):

| | | | |
|------------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| D.M. Cundy | C.A. Davies | G. Davies | H.L. Davies |
| L. Davies | T. Davies | H.A.L. Evans | L.D. Evans |
| S. Godfrey-Coles | T.M. Higgins | J.K. Howell | P. Hughes-Griffiths |
| J.D. James | M. James | R. James | G.H. John |
| A.C. Jones | D. Jones | H. Jones | A. Lenny |
| M.J.A. Lewis | N. Lewis | D. Nicholas | M. Palfreman |
| D. Price | E. Rees | H.B. Shepardson | E. Skinner |
| R. Sparks | D. Thomas | E.G. Thomas | M. Thomas |
| A. Vaughan Owen | | | |

Councillors (Virtually):

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| S.M. Allen | L.R. Bowen | K.V. Broom | J.M. Charles |
| M.D. Cranham | S.A. Curry | A. Davies | W.R.A. Davies |
| T.A.J. Davies | C. Davies | LI.M. Davies | S.L. Davies |
| M. Donoghue | A. Evans | D.C. Evans | N. Evans |
| R.E. Evans | W.T. Evans | A.D. Harries | B.W. Jones |
| A. Leyshon | A.G. Morgan | D. Owen | B.D.J. Phillips |
| S.L. Rees | E.M.J.G. Schiavone | J. Seward | G.B. Thomas |
| F. Walters | P.T. Warlow | D.E. Williams | J. Williams |

Also Present (In Person):

W. Walters, Chief Executive;
J. Morgan, Director of Community Services;
P.R. Thomas, Assistant Chief Executive (People Management & Performance);
C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services;
G. Morgans, Director of Education & Children's Services;
A. Williams, Director of Place and Infrastructure;
L.R. Jones, Head of Administration and Law;
G. Morgan, Head of Democratic Services;
A. Edwards, Electoral & Civil Registration Services Manager;
G. Jones, Digital Programme Manager (City Deal);
C. Higginson, Media Manager;
L. Jenkins, Cabinet Support Officer;
S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator;
J. Owen, Democratic Services Officer.

Also Present (Virtually):

R. Morris, Members Support Officer

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 10.00 am - 12.03 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P. Cooper, B. Davies, J. Hart, P.M. Hughes, G. Jones, K. Madge and J. Tremlett.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS.

| Councillor | Minute Number | Nature of Interest |
|------------|--|--|
| S. Davies | 11.1 – Notice of Motion proposed by Councillor Linda Evans and Edward Thomas | Works for Dolen Teifi – has dispensation to speak but not vote |

3. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

- The Chair stated that she had visited Mrs Dilys Rees, mother of former Councillor Mair Stephens, on her 100 birthday, she was a true inspiration.
- The Chair announced that she had attended the Loud Applause Rising Stars (LARS) at the Furnace, Llanelli which was a wonderful evening spent with the youth of Carmarthenshire.
- At the Chairs invite the following Councillors addressed the Council:-
 - Councillor Ann Davies, called on Members to reflect upon those who had been caught up in the unfolding events in Israel over the last few days. The County's commitment to peace and equality which led towards speaking out against injustice and acts of violence. It was hoped that a swift solution would be found to allow future peace. In respect of all the families involved and impacted upon in the injustice, Council stood in reflection.
 - Councillor Sean Rees, on behalf of the Members for Glan-y-mor Ward, expressed congratulations to the Havelock Bowls Club in Morfa who achieved a total of 6 trophies during what had been a very successful season. The Club had been crowned Premier League Champions, Howard Griffiths and Phil Nicolas being Festival Pairs Champions. Rob Hughes, Leigh Moses and Chris Spriggs being Triples Champions. In addition, Mr Spriggs represented team Wales in the Para Lawn Bowls at the Commonwealth Games last year. Mr Spriggs is an inspiration to all in promoting disability sport within our community.

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

The Leader provided an update on the developments at Stradey Park Hotel. Reference was made to yesterday's statement issued by the UK Government of their intention to withdraw the use of the Stradey Park Hotel to be used by Asylum Seekers. This was warmly welcomed as it was felt that the site was inappropriate.

The Leader highlighted that letter of representations had been forwarded to the UK Government on this matter since the May 2023. It was reported that last week the Chief Executive and the Leader had written to both civil servants and the Minister at the Home Office, expressing severe concern with regard to the community tensions which had been escalating over the recent weeks.

Whilst it was recognised that the proposed model would not be suitable or appropriate for the site, it was disappointing that it had taken 6 months for the UK Government to reach the conclusion to withdraw the use of the Stradey Park Hotel. This matter had significantly impacted the community of Llanelli over the last 6 months with the loss of 95 jobs in July of this year, together with a key tourism asset in the form of a 4* hotel.

The Leader conveyed his thanks to this Council, led by the Chief Executive, supported by the Corporate Management Team and Officers from Planning, Legal, Regeneration, Enforcement and many other Officers who had worked tirelessly and had worked above and beyond the call of duty in order to find a resolution which supported the wishes of the people of Furnace and Llanelli.

In addition, gratitude was expressed in regard to the support received from Welsh Government who had backed the Council's stance. The Leader reported that he had been in contact with the Minister of Social Justice many times throughout the duration of this matter and however, wished to note that he had not been had the opportunity to discuss the matter with the UK Government Minister responsible for proposing the action. Consistent objections from this Council and the Welsh Government were made to the UK Government.

In conclusion, the Leader emphasised that this Council had a proud record in welcoming and supporting refugees and asylum seekers to Carmarthenshire over the years and would continue to do so.

The Chair by exception allowed the local members to speak in on the Leaders' announcement.

Cllr Palfreman echoed the Leaders statement and the welcoming news which would be a relief to the community. He wished to convey his thanks to the Leader and the many Council Officers who had consistently made a case against the proposals and had helped local members in providing information and practical support to the affected residents. Furthermore, Cllr Palfreman conveyed his personal thanks to Nia Griffiths MP and Lee Waters MS who had firmly stood their ground in support of and for the people of Llanelli.

Cllr Skinner in reflecting upon the welcoming news, wished to express thanks to the Chief Executive and the Officers of Carmarthenshire County Council, Dyfed Powys Police and the Furnace Action Committee.

5. TO APPROVE AND SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON THE 13TH SEPTEMBER 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on the 13th September 2023 be signed as a correct record.

6. ESTYN INSPECTION OF CARMARTHENSHIRE'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT EDUCATION SERVICES

Council received a report on the Estyn Inspection of Carmarthenshire's Local Government Education Services and the areas identified for development.

The report provided information in relation to the Estyn Inspection and appended the final report from Estyn. The preliminary visit took place on the 22nd and 23rd June 2023. Interviews took place with a range of stakeholders including headteacher representatives for primary, secondary and special schools; representatives of Chairs of Governors across primary, secondary and special schools; the regional education partnership, Partneriaeth; trade union representatives; diocese; the local health board, parents and officers from other Directorates of the Local Authority.

The report was published on 27th September 2023 and had identified many strengths and notable features. Council noted the following three recommendations made:

- R1 Improve pupils' attendance in the authority's schools;
- R2 Strengthen school improvement processes, particularly for secondary schools;
- R3 Refine approaches to self-evaluation and improvement planning.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Welsh Language in presenting the report to Council expressed that he was pleased to present the excellent report and was proud of the commendable work of Carmarthenshire's Education Services and grateful for the efforts of all staff, schools and pupils recognised in this thorough report by Estyn. It was reported that the vision and strategic leadership in Carmarthenshire was clear and distinct, to enable the best possible education for our children and young people.

Gratitude was conveyed to the education staff present and all officers involved for their continuous work that had led to the positive outcome.

RESOLVED that:

6.1 the report on the Estyn Inspection of Carmarthenshire's Local Government Education Services be received;

6.2 the current position and arrangements in place to address the recommendations and minor areas for improvement be noted.

7. THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (DEMOCRACY) (WALES) ACT 2013 (“THE ACT”)-COMMUNITY REVIEW

Council, at its meeting on 8 March 2023 (Minute 7 refers), approved the commencement of a Community Review to examine existing Town and Community governance arrangements and make Final Recommendations for any appropriate change.

The Council had a duty under s22 of the Local Government (Democracy) (Wales) Act 2013 (“the Act”) to report every ten years on a community review having regard to the Local and Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales (LDBCW) timetable for conducting the reviews of principal areas’ electoral arrangements required by section 29 (1) of the Act. The last electoral review was carried out by LDBCW was conducted in 2021.

The formal consultation period was published on the Council’s website, but a more targeted engagement was also undertaken. Representations were invited from Monday 13 March to Monday 24 April 2023. Twenty-four representations were received during the consultation period, and these have been reviewed and proposals for Draft Recommendations have been prepared. Appended to the report as Appendix 1 provided a summary of the responses received and proposals for Draft Recommendations arising from these.

As part of this review, it was identified that there were anomalies with community boundaries which were appended to the report at Appendix B.

RESOLVED that:

7.1 That the proposals set out in Annex 1 to the report as Final Recommendations for the purposes of the Community Review be adopted.

7.2 a further review under Section 25 of the Local Government (Democracy) (Wales) Act 2013 for the following be agreed:

- a) Llangydeyrn Community Council and Llanelli Rural Council**
- b) Llangydeyrn Community Council and Trimsaran Community Council**
- c) Llangydeyrn Community Council and Pontyberem Community Council**

8. POLLING DISTRICT AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW 2023

Council received a report on the Polling District and Polling Places Review 2023. The report sought Council’s approval of plans for a statutory review of polling districts and polling places within the County of Carmarthenshire.

The Council, under the Representation of the People Act 1983 and the Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006 is required to conduct a compulsory review every 5 years. The next review must be held within a 16- month period commencing 1 October 2023. The report proposed that the compulsory polling district and places review commences on Thursday 12 October 2023.

The report included a proposed timetable for the review which was recommended for approval.

In addition, the report provided information and proposals in respect of implementing parliamentary boundary changes and implementing polling district changes.

RESOLVED that:

- 8.1 the compulsory polling district and places review commence on Thursday 12 October 2023;**
 - 8.2 the outline timetable for the review be approved;**
 - 8.3 approval be granted to follow the review process as described in this report;**
 - 8.4 the Electoral Registration Officer be authorised to take the necessary measures as soon as possible to give effect to parliamentary constituency changes, ensuring that the register reflects existing and new constituencies, until the boundaries are fully in force;**
 - 8.5 the Electoral Registration Officer be authorised to take the necessary measures to give effect to any new or amended polling districts on completion of the polling district review, ensuring that the register reflects existing and new boundaries, until the boundaries are fully in force;**
 - 8.5 power to designate polling places in accordance with section 18 and 18A of the Representation of the People Act 1983 be delegated to the Electoral Services Manager-such power to be exercised only where a decision is required at short notice, and it is not possible to await a decision of Council.**
- 9. TO CONSIDER THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CABINET IN RESPECT OF THE FOLLOWING ITEM:-**
- 9.1. ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT AND PRUDENTIAL INDICATOR REPORT 2022-2023**

The Council was informed that the Cabinet, at its meeting held on the 18 September 2023 (minute 6 thereof refers), had considered the Council's Annual Treasury Management and Prudential Indicator Report for the 2021-22.

RESOLVED that the following recommendation of the Cabinet be adopted:

“that the Annual Treasury Management and Prudential Indicator Report for 2022-23 be adopted.”

10. TO RECEIVE THE REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD ON THE 18TH SEPTEMBER 2023

RESOLVED that the report of the meeting of Cabinet held on the 18th September, 2023 be received.

11. TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING NOTICE OF MOTION:-

11.1. NOTICE OF MOTION PROPOSED BY COUNCILLOR LINDA EVANS AND EDWARD THOMAS

[Note: Councillor S. Davies, having earlier declared an interest in this item, re-declared her interest and that she could speak but not vote on this item in accordance with the dispensation].

Council considered the following Notice of Motion submitted by Councillors Linda Evans and Edward Thomas:-

“Council notes that the fflecsi Bwcabus service has been operating for 14 years providing a vital opportunity to travel by public transport in some of the most rural areas of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire. Council expresses its disappointment with the Welsh Government announcement that the service will end on the 31st October 2023, which will be a significant blow to our rural communities. Council is dismayed that Welsh Government secured replacement buses for these services as recently as July 2023. Council recognises the unique challenges faced by rural communities in accessing public transport and reaffirms its commitment to work to improve public and community transport services across the County.

Council calls on the Welsh Government to review its decision, to work with local authorities in West Wales, and provide funding in order to develop a sustainable public and community transport system which can support and connect our rural communities. In the meantime, we call on Welsh Government to continue with the Flexi Bwcabus until an alternative service is in operation for our rural areas.”

The motion was duly seconded.

The proposers and seconder of the Motion were afforded the opportunity of speaking in support thereof and outlined the reasons for its submission, as set out in the Motion.

A number of statements were made in support of the Motion.

RESOLVED that the Motion be supported.

12. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED).

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

13. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS:-

13.1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR RUSSELL SPARKS TO COUNCILLOR LINDA EVANS, DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR HOMES

Question by Cllr. Sparkes:

“Could you please advise me of the progress being made towards decarbonising our housing stock in light of the climate emergency declaration of 2019 and this Council’s commitment to a better future for our children. Specifically, what are your major obstacles to achieving ‘net zero’ in relation to the council housing stock which will ultimately help reduce bills for residents given the ongoing cost of living crisis?”

Response by Cllr. Evans:

“I will just explain where we stand at the moment. As you are aware and as is stated in our business plan for 2023/24, our aim as a department is to make our homes as efficient as possible in relation to energy and achieving at least energy performance certificate of Band C as soon as possible. Decarbonising our stock of homes and reducing our carbon emissions will be a strategic focus for us for the years to come. 3,000 of our homes are in EPC Band C or higher already with almost 5,800 homes in Band D with a SAP level of 66 which is slightly higher than the standard set in the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and I think that is 65 at the moment. In order to reach the aim, to begin with improving the fabric of our homes is essential, also we need to have low carbon heating and renewable technology.

The challenge is huge but we have to do everything we can to decarbonise our stock of homes which will be beneficial for the environment and for our tenants. As you know, our new build programme has pushed the boundaries for social housing by providing homes which are low in carbon and effective in relation to energy and as we continue to build we will be continuing to push those boundaries. We are using the same method when we provide new homes for people by redeveloping current commercial buildings in effective and modern homes, using the fabric first approach and using renewable technologies to provide an affordable and comfortable living environment for our tenants. Of course, we have to make sure that we use the same method when doing a retrofit on our current housing stock. We have already made a full retrofit on some of our homes which pushes the standard of the home to the same as our new homes. We place monitoring equipment in the homes in order to enable us to measure the impact of performance. This is essential in order to make sure that the work we are doing to our homes meets the expectations of our data model and more importantly, that our tenants benefit.

This year we are continuing with the work. We are at the moment taking the opportunity to do a retrofit on a percentage of our voids and for the first time we are working on homes where tenants are living in them at the moment which of course presents additional challenges. This is important as we plan for the future and in order to understand better what we can achieve for our housing stock and learn important lessons about this intervention that this work has on tenants, on costs, on skills and labour that are required and of course, the effectiveness of the measures that have been taken. We have to do this as we go forward so that we can learn because we have to get it right. We have by now a good understanding of our energy performance rates.

At the moment, we are analysing our data on stock condition in order to develop our investment work programme for the next five years. This will all be reflected in the HRA business plan for 2024/25. We have to make sure that we do what is going to succeed for our homes and of course we have to remember that our stock of homes have been built over a period of decades and not one technology will be relevant to every home. If I move on to the second part of the question – are there any barriers? Yes, there are barriers that we have to overcome. I am extremely pleased that the Welsh Government this year have published a draft of the new Welsh Housing Quality Standard for consultation. This is the handbook for Local Authorities for standards and consistency for homes in Wales for the years to come. I have to admit that it has taken quite some time to get to us but I do hope that the final paper will be in place soon.

As expected, decarbonising our homes will be a big part of the new Standards and as I mentioned earlier, we have already started on this journey but we have to have clear guidelines from the Welsh Government on funding for the future in order to reach the Standards in full. There are challenges in relation to high cost to improve the fabric of all our homes - setting PV solar etc and of course the usual work of providing new rooves, new windows etc will have to continue as it is at the moment and so additional cost. So far, we have applied and have been successful with providing applications for a variety of grants but clear guidelines in relation to funding from the Welsh Government will give definite assurance for us as we move forward. As the years go on limited capacity of the national grid could be a problem as we depend more and more on electrical systems in our homes in order to fight against the carbon emissions. Using materials that are produced locally, this is important for us as a county. There is a lack of local producers in relation to materials and I hope this will change as time goes on. And of course, as the need for materials and technology increase so too will the skills and specialist tradesman demand increase as well.

So that is where we stand at the moment. There are challenges, a lot of them and I am sure that more will come across us from time to time but I am very confident that we will overcome these and I will be very pleased when the process will be able to move forward faster than it is at the moment, as we get the new Standards there is a possibility that will happen, but what we have done on a couple of hundred homes is working and it is working well.”

13.2. QUESTION BY COUNCILLOR JOHN JAMES TO COUNCILLOR DARREN PRICE, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Question by Cllr. James:

“Artificial Intelligence is a transformative technology that is being used throughout the Private and Public Sectors nationally and globally and is playing an improving and progressive role. My question comes in two parts:

Firstly: What steps are Carmarthenshire County Council currently taking regarding Artificial Intelligence to ensure that this Council keeps up with key trends and developments and that it draws on the best practice of other Local Authorities and Public Sector Organisations in the U.K. are implementing and innovating on.

Secondly: Looking to the future; how is this Council aiming to maximise the benefits of Artificial Intelligence so that viable opportunities and practices can be engaged, whilst also recognising, and dealing with the challenges this technology will undoubtedly raise as it progresses.”

Response by Cllr. Price:

“In response to the first question, we have been following developments within AI for some time and our officers are aware of the latest developments and are in constant contact with industry experts, private sector partners and suppliers. We are also involved with a variety of public sector forums and work streams, working with the WLGA, the Centre for Digital Public Services and the Welsh Government to make sure that we are well placed to apply the best practices of Local Authorities and other public sector organisations in relation to AI.

The connections we have already made and our presence in these Forums helps us to share learning and note the most beneficial opportunities for Carmarthenshire. They also provide vital information about the possible risks and challenges with AI, allowing us to prepare with that in mind. For us to truly embrace AI we need to understand the business case, the cost, the benefits etc case by case. It is also essential that we understand the likely impact of this technology on our public services, on residents and of course our workforce in order to make sure that our adoption of this is moral and safe.

We will continue to take the necessary steps and our relationships with public and private sector partners to make sure that Carmarthenshire keeps up with key trends and developments in AI. We are already trialling the use of AI in relation to two HR processes and our Digital Transformation Board is looking at other departments where we can use and learn through use of AI. For example, one of the processes, we have a bot within the HR Department which was introduced recently, and the bot is able to process information 24 hours a day and is more effective than the previous process.

There are savings obviously as well as better process effectiveness. We are monitoring this so that the monitoring people are working with our department to use AI to similes' our contract managing processes in HR. This will reduce our use of occasional staff and will provide improvements for services including accelerating processes. There is of course a core issue in terms of AI, is it replacing jobs and shrinking the workforce.

We are on an AI journey, in the initial phase and we are working closely with unions and we will continue to do that as we develop our use of AI in Carmarthenshire. Indeed, the use of AI has been a discussion point in our meetings with our union colleagues and we have given assurance that using AI will not be a direct threat to appointing new staff. In response to the second part of the question, our officers at the moment are writing a position statement on AI for the Council. The paper will be presented to the Transformation Board during the autumn this year and as well as that our new digital strategy for Carmarthenshire for the next few years, up to 2027, is being worked on at the moment. This new digital strategy will focus significantly on innovation including AI of course and as part of developing this strategy, for the first time we will be undertaking a public consultation making sure that residents and businesses do have the opportunity to give their views and expectations. I hope that gives you an overview."

Supplementary Question by Cllr. James:

"Very comprehensive and informative answer from the Leader which shows how seriously you yourself and the County Council are taking this subject. Can you initiate a presentation or a seminar in the near future on this most important subject so we know more about it and we have that information to take out to residents who might ask us questions and we will have something to give them as answers. We don't know much about it and some people say A1 instead of AI as that is how much people have grasped it so far. But it is important, it is progressive throughout the world globally, so it is important that we get this knowledge as well. If you could initiate a seminar or a presentation for us on this sometime in the future."

Response by Cllr. Price:

"As you say, this is something new for us. I am learning as well. It is something that is becoming more apparent for us as a public sector and it's important that we all understand what is to come and the challenges and the risks as I mentioned regarding staffing etc. We had a discussion on this item as part of our overview as a Cabinet about two weeks ago I think and quite a lot of work is taking place in this area across the Council and as I mentioned earlier, as we go out to consultation on this strategy, we want to make sure that residents and businesses specifically feed into it because the private sector has a vital role to develop this agenda in the county. In relation to members that is something that we have discussed with officers and we see a specific seminar for members as an important part of that consultation in terms of the new strategy. So, to answer the question, there will be a seminar and hopefully we can get that in place over the next few months."

14. MINUTES FOR INFORMATION (AVAILABLE TO VIEW ON THE WEBSITE)

The Chair stated that the minutes outlined on the agenda under 14.1 – 14.5 were available for information on the Council website.

CHAIR

DATE