

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held by video conference on Thursday 14 October 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Martyn Holland, Bob Murray, Paul Penlington, Arwel Roberts (Chair), Peter Scott and David Williams

Chair of the Member Task & Finish Group – Councillor Christine Marston

Cabinet Members – Councillors Bobby Feeley (Lead Member for Well-being and Independence), Huw Hilditch-Roberts, (Lead Member for Education, Children’s Services and Public Engagement), Tony Thomas (Lead Member for Housing and Communities) and Mark Young (Lead Member for Planning, Public Protection and Safer Communities)

Observers – Councillors Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones, Meirick Davies, Glenn Swingler, Rhys Thomas and Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Chief Executive (GB), Corporate Director Communities (NS), Commissioning and Planning Officer (JA), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Officers (KEJ & RTJ [Webcaster])

Public Speaker – Brenda Jones (parent of service user of Meifod) attended for item 5.

1 APOLOGIES

Councillors Ellie Chard, Hugh Irving (Vice Chair), Geraint Lloyd-Williams, Pete Prendergast and Andrew Thomas together with the Head of Community Support Services (PG) and Service Manager Client Services (KN)

The Chair advised that Councillor Pete Prendergast had been unable to attend the meeting but had submitted comments to be read out in his absence as follows –

“Item 5 Meifod Enterprise – I myself chair a community based group helping residents from all walks of life to learn skills through an apprentice scheme not only to upskill people, but give them confidence in their own abilities and maybe the possibility of work. Meifod is so important to the people attending, offering similar opportunities to the group I chair. I urge all councillors to support the continuation of this very worthy scheme, and for the residents who use this training facility to continue to have every opportunity to progress in life and maybe obtain work. I also feel that exploring opportunities through both Denbighshire County Council and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for future work/job skills would confirm the tremendous work Meifod carries out in enabling people to progress in life and benefit both organisations in employing dedicated and trained staff. There is a definite need for groups such as Meifod in giving people any chance of gaining

skills as it is so important everyone from all walks of life nowadays to gain some form of employment and improve their own lives and those of their families.”

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declaration of interests had been raised.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters had been raised.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held on 15 July 2021 were submitted.

Matters Arising –

Item 5 – Draft Director of Social Services Annual Reports 2019-20 & 2020-21 – the Chair highlighted matters arising from the minutes and the Scrutiny Support Officer confirmed that further information on support for young carers together with an information report relating to Cefndy Healthcare had been contained within the Committee’s Information Brief circulated to members the previous week. The suggestion for a glossary of terms in the Annual Report had also been taken forward. The Corporate Director Communities provided an update on the development of Bwthyn y Ddôl advising that it would be necessary to re-tender for the construction of the new facility given that the firm originally contracted had since entered into administration. Due to the impact on timescales and funding, discussions had taken place with the Welsh Government who continued to support the project going forward. It would not be possible to confirm a timeframe for the development until the outcome of the tendering process.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2021 be received and approved as a correct record.

5 MEIFOD WOOD PRODUCTS

The Chair welcomed all present for this item, including the Corporate Director Communities and the Commissioning and Planning Officer together with Councillor Bobby Feeley, Lead Member for Well-being and Independence whose portfolio covered the service area. A warm welcome was also extended to Brenda Jones, parent of a service user of Meifod who would also be addressing the Committee.

The joint report by the Service Manager Client Services and the Commissioning and Planning Officer (previously circulated) detailed the results of the consultation exercise to inform the future operation of service provision at Meifod and potential options for the service, including the recommendation from the Member Task and Finish Group, with a view to the Committee formulating recommendations to Cabinet in relation to future service delivery.

Councillor Christine Marston, Chair of the Member Task and Finish Group reported upon the discussions of the Group on the detailed information and options put forward by officers in their report. The Group strongly recommended that the facility be kept open and for it to reopen as soon as possible but appreciated that clients needed to be maintained in a safe environment and clearly reviews had to be carried out on the machinery used given the safety concerns raised in that regard. The Group had also considered that officers should explore working with social enterprise and/or the private sector to deliver the service in order to safeguard its continuation given the financial challenges faced and be more creative in the way the service was managed. The Group considered that Meifod provided a good service which was vital to the people who used and engaged with it, producing well known quality products bought locally and it would be very sad if that was to be lost.

The Corporate Director Communities referred to the detailed information provided and thanked the Task and Finish Group and the Scrutiny Committee for their work and scrutiny of the report. Meifod was a very welcome and valued service by those who accessed it and also for staff who worked there, the local community, the families of the people who attended and those who referred people there. That said there was a need to consider the viability of all services and opportunities to modernise and meet people's needs. Meifod closed at the end of March 2020 due to Covid-19 and restrictions in place but given that those restrictions were being reduced it was an opportune time to consider the future of the service. Consequently an engagement exercise had been carried out over a period of weeks seeking the views of service users, their families/carers, and service staff together with other stakeholders. Whilst it was clearly a valued service, some people did not want to return to Meifod and would like to consider other opportunities and different activities and therefore it was important to consider the difference of opinion. Having considered a number of options put forward by officers the Member Task and Finish Group had recommended that Meifod should be re-opened as a Council-run service, with reduced activities and new ways of working, and that work be commenced to secure an external organisation or social enterprise to provide a range of activities for people from the existing Meifod building but that this may not be woodwork based activities, with a view to exploring the long term sustainability of Meifod. The Corporate Director confirmed that officers were in complete agreement and supported the recommendation of the Member Task and Finish Group and welcomed questions from the Committee.

During a lengthy debate members scrutinised the report in detail and took the opportunity to raise questions and discuss with officers various aspects of the report. Members paid tribute to Meifod and the valuable service it provided for all those involved with it, acknowledging the significant impact on the wellbeing of individuals accessing the service and opportunities the service presented to them. All members were in agreement that the Council should take necessary steps to safeguard the service for the future and ensure it continued to be delivered for the benefit of service users and their families. Consequently whilst there was support for the recommendation of the Member Task and Finish Group to re-open the service and explore opportunities to ensure its future viability, the Committee considered that the recommendation could be further strengthened to include additional investment and to ensure Meifod was re-opened as soon as possible.

Main issues discussed related to the leasing arrangements; management of repair and maintenance of both building and machinery and concerns regarding the decline; financial pressures facing the service; potential diversification of the service; reasoning behind the reduction in the number of referrals to the service; the engagement exercise, and compliance with the Council's Welsh Language Policy. Officers were also challenged on detail of the report and reasoning behind the various options put forward. The main points of debate focused on the following –

- it was clarified that the current building was subject to a ten year lease with four years remaining up to 30 September 2025; the building was in a state of disrepair and whilst basic maintenance had continued during its closure there had inevitably been issues of deterioration to the building and machinery which had not been in use for a significant period, and there was also a need to upgrade the heating system over concerns of the recirculation of air
- the expensive running costs of the building relating to heating/electricity costs were noted in addition to rent, repair and maintenance costs and there was some debate as to whether Meifod should remain in the existing building long term or whether the service would be better relocated to a more modernised council owned building given the costs associated with the current building and restrictions in terms of any energy efficiency saving adaptations, etc.
- in terms of the potential diversification and provision of alternative work opportunities/activities a range of other products could be explored and further work would be required with service users to seek their views together with other external organisations/social enterprises in terms of available opportunities. Councillor Bob Murray in particular was keen that the potential to work with the NHS was explored, potentially producing face masks, etc.
- whilst the price increase in timber was acknowledged members suggested that wood could be procured locally and officers agreed to look into that possibility
- social workers were more likely to signpost people to non-statutory community based activities and projects to increase the number of individuals in paid jobs or voluntary opportunities although it was acknowledged that approach was not for everyone and some individuals needed the opportunities Meifod provided
- Councillor Bobby Feeley provided some background to Meifod which was set up in 1972 and elaborated upon its aims and objectives together with its success over the years. As Lead Member for the service she would not sanction the closure of Meifod but agreed that changes needed to be made to improve the offer and looked to working collaboratively over the remaining four year term of the building lease to secure a sustainable economic enterprise and potential diversification of activities including working with the NHS and recycling/upcycling. She was keen for the health and safety requirements to be addressed in order that Meifod could be re-opened as soon as possible
- questions were raised by Councillor Rhys Thomas regarding lack of investment in repair/maintenance requirements identified relating to the machinery and heating system and he also queried whether the level of wood stock currently held by Meifod would enable woodwork to continue – both himself and Councillor Emrys Wynne were keen that wood products continued to be produced. Officers agreed to look into the repair/maintenance issues and wood stores and report back to Councillor Thomas thereon. Since compilation of the report Welsh Government had announced a new Social Care Recovery Fund and it was hoped some of the repair costs could be recouped through that fund

- it was confirmed that the recommendation from the Member Task and Finish Group, supported by officers, was to use the remaining time of the building lease to work with people who currently used the service to explore what interests they had and also to look at the opportunities that may be available by working in partnership with others. Other organisations were able to access funding streams (not available to the local authority) to invest monies in new services and opportunities – all of those options needed to be explored
- officers elaborated upon the reasoning behind the cost variation between different services which in Meifod's case included a high rent level and other costs associated with the building, and a high proportion of individuals needing one to one support, and therefore it was difficult to compare like with like with different services providing different activities
- the reasoning behind the reduced number of people attending Meifod and lack of signposting to the service had been due to the introduction of the Social Services and Well-being Act in 2014 and the asset based approach taken to look at what assets an individual had themselves or within their communities which had resulted in more people being signposted to other activities and community based services, consequently all statutory services had seen fewer referrals. That approach worked for some individuals but it was acknowledged that there were individuals who would need a statutory service
- the statement relating to demographic change was important because those individuals referred to Meifod tended to be those who had more complex needs and there was a need to ensure the service could respond to those needs
- referrals to the service were made following an assessment by the Complex Disability Team which included health and social care practitioners
- the point made in the reference to “the council does not exist to supply benches” was that Meifod existed to provide a service and work based activities for people and whilst making a profit was welcomed it was not the primary concern
- a ‘Meet the Buyer’ event had been held in March 2020 which had been an exploratory exercise looking at work opportunity services and whether there were other partners or stakeholders interested in Meifod, however that work had not progressed due to Covid-19. In the event a future decision was taken to look at other alternatives and options then it would be considered again further
- Councillor Meirick Davies also provided some background to Meifod and its relocation from Henllan to Denbigh. In response to questions officers confirmed that the documentation relating to the engagement exercise had been produced bilingually and the origin of the name ‘Meifod’ was unknown. Officers agreed to provide further detail of the costs of providing the service including the gross annual costs prior to the pandemic for comparison with the annual net cost
- the next steps involved the Committee making a recommendation to Cabinet on 23 November 2021 and subject to that decision, work would be carried out to prepare for the re-opening as soon as possible.

At this juncture the Chair invited Mrs. Brenda Jones, whose son used the service at Meifod, to address the Committee.

Mrs. Jones advised that she was representing her own family and other families who had been affected by the current situation. She explained to the Committee about her son's involvement with Meifod and provided a moving account of the valuable service it provided and made a heartfelt plea that Meifod be re-opened

and continued in its current form. Mrs. Jones highlighted concerns over the nature and competency of the engagement exercise and potential future options for the service. She also highlighted issues within the report, including the lack of suitable community based activities, and felt more should be done to market Meifod with local schools and take out of county placements which would contribute financially. She also believed that individuals had left because the service had no longer been there but that they would return once it re-opened. Attention was drawn to the lack of investment in the facility over time and comments made within the engagement report prepared by the North Wales Advice and Advocacy Service and their view that the engagement exercise had not provided adequate opportunity for most Meifod attendees to participate. Finally reference was made to the counter-argument which Mrs. Jones had previously emailed to Committee members and she looked to the Committee to continue the operation of Meifod in its current form.

The Chair and other members thanked Mrs. Jones for speaking to the Committee which provided a valuable insight into the impact of the service. The Chair confirmed the general consensus during the meeting that Meifod be protected and preserved for the future and additional investment be provided in the service.

As Lead Cabinet Member responsible for the service area, Councillor Bobby Feeley confirmed a clear message across all political groups that Meifod be kept open and she had been heartened to hear the questions and contributions from members together with various ideas for the service and how it could be expanded and improved. Notwithstanding comments made regarding the inadequacies of the engagement exercise or the report, the recommendation of the Member Task and Finish Group had been to keep Meifod open and explore opportunities over the next four years to move forward to modernise and improve the service. Councillor Feeley looked forward to an optimistic future for Meifod and thanked officers for responding to questions and comments put forward.

The Committee discussed the recommendations contained within the report and agreed to re-word those recommendations going forward to Cabinet to include the need to re-open Meifod as soon as possible and provision of additional investment together with ensuring compliance with the Council's Welsh Language policy.

The Committee –

RESOLVED that having considered the issues facing Meifod, the feedback from the stakeholders who participated in the engagement exercise, the advantages, disadvantages and risks associated with the potential options contained within the report, along with the outcomes and recommendations submitted by the Task and Finish Group to recommend to Cabinet that –

- (a) *Meifod should be re-opened as soon as possible as a Council-run service within the existing building, with additional investment being provided for the service provided there;*
- (b) *work commence to explore all opportunities for new ways of working to improve and develop Meifod, including the potential of securing an external organisation/social enterprise to provide a range of activities for people from*

the existing Meifod building (all of which do not necessarily have to be woodwork based activities) with a view to exploring and securing the long-term sustainability of Meifod, and

- (c) *future service-provision conform with all relevant legislation and the Council's Welsh Language policy.*

The Chair thanked all present for their attendance and contributions to debate.

6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator submitted a report (previously circulated) seeking members' review of the committee's work programme and providing an update on relevant issues.

Discussion focused on the following –

- it was noted that the report on the Customer Relationship Manager System scheduled for the next meeting on 25 November had been confirmed and members reaffirmed all four items listed in the work programme for that meeting
- the four items listed in the work programme for the meeting scheduled for 27 January were also noted and reaffirmed
- members were encouraged to submit any proposal forms regarding topics for scrutiny prior to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group scheduled for 25 November
- reference was made to the information reports contained with the Committee's Information Brief circulated the previous week with regard to the Cefndy Interim Report 2021-2022, and the Corporate Plan Performance Update: April to June 2021. The latter report would aid the Committee when scrutinising Quarter 2 of the Corporate Plan 2021/22 at its next meeting on 25 November.

RESOLVED *that, subject to the amendments agreed above, the Committee's forward work programme as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report be approved.*

7 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

No reports from committee representatives had been received.

The Chief Executive commended the high level of scrutiny and debate during the meeting and as the Corporate Lead Officer for Performance Scrutiny Committee he looked forward to attending future meetings. At the Chair's request the Chief Executive provided an update on discussions in relation to succession planning for the posts involving the Head of Community Support Services, Head of Business Improvement and Modernisation, and Corporate Director Public Realm which would involve a review of the Senior Leadership Team structure.

The meeting concluded at 12.10 pm.