

**MEETING OF THE FULL COUNCIL OF ABERTILLERY AND LLANHILLETH
COMMUNITY COUNCIL (ALCC) HELD ON 27 JULY 2022 AT 7.00pm
in the Council Chamber at Council Offices, Mitre Street, Abertillery.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Nick Simmons (Chair); Peter Adamson; Roger Clark; Barrie Page; Rob Phillips; Josh Rawcliffe; Glyn Smith; Bernard Wall; Graham White

Officers: David Cartwright (Clerk)

BY VIDEO LINK

Councillors: Tracey Dyson (Vice Chair);

Apologies: Michaela Assiratti; Mariola Walters.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Michaela Assiratti and Mariola Walters.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST OR DISPENSATIONS

None

3. MINUTES – 29 JUNE 2022

The Council **RESOLVED** that the draft minutes were a true and correct record of the meeting.

4. 2021/2022 ACCOUNTS AND ANNUAL RETURN

The Report on the Accounts and Annual Return for 2021-22 was presented by the Clerk as Responsible Financial Officer. He stated that accounts would normally be presented by 30 June each year but, as the Council had needed to first prepare and publish the delayed accounts for 2020-21, Audit Wales had been informed in April that the accounts for 2021-22 would be late. The accounts had not undergone an internal audit. Following discussions with Audit Wales in April, the Clerk was eager that an internal audit should not merely check that the figures add up but should also assess the adequacy of the Council's budgetary processes and its systems of financial oversight. He intended to return later in the year with proposals for a full internal audit by specialist internal auditors. As the Council was reporting income or expenditure over £200,000 for a third year, the annual return had been prepared on an income and expenditure basis for the first time. This change meant that debtors and creditors were shown. At year-end, the Council had yet to receive invoices for its staff costs for the last three quarters of 2021-22. The relevant sum had been included as a creditor. The adjustment of some £47,000 meant that the accounting balance on 31 March 2022 offered a better guide to the Council's true financial health than the year-end figures reported on a receipts and payments basis had been in previous years. The Council's expenditure in 2020-21 had been curtailed by Covid restrictions and it had been recognised that this had left it holding more public funds than planned. Consequently, the Council set a precept that was £70,000 lower than its budget for 2021-22. This should have had the effect of reducing the amount of public money that the Council was holding by several tens of thousands of pounds.

However, the annual return showed that the Council's accounting balance fell by only £13,000 during 2021-22. At year end, the Council was still holding more public money than had been planned and more than was appropriate.

Graham White asked why the previous internal auditor had not been reemployed to audit the accounts. The Clerk replied that the previous internal auditor had resigned. Audit Wales had highlighted that there was a chronic problem with the poor standard of internal audits at many of Wales's community councils. As Responsible Financial Officer, he was following Audit Wales's advice in working to identify an internal auditor with specialist knowledge of smaller public bodies to assess the Council's financial processes, systems and governance and to provide an audit of real benefit to the Council and to the general public.

The Council **RESOLVED** to agree that the accounting statements shown in the report fairly present the financial position of the Council for the year ending 31 March 2022.

Graham White said that, as well as voting against the accounts, he would write to Audit Wales to object to the accounts. The Clerk said that, if Cllr White had evidence that the Council's accounts had been falsified or that its real financial position had been deliberately mis-stated, he had to make that evidence known to the meeting. Cllr White replied that he did not *have* to do anything.

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise the Chair of the Council to complete and sign the Annual Return on the basis of these accounts.

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise the Responsible Financial Officer to submit the Annual Return, including the Annual Governance Statement, for the year ended 31 March 2022 and all relevant associated documents to Audit Wales as required.

Bernard Wall stated that he had been sent a copy of an email to the Council from a member of the public (and former-community councillor), Allan Thomas, and asked why it had not been read out at the meeting. The Vice Chair reminded Members that the Council had resolved in 2018 that correspondence with Mr Thomas should be restricted in line with the Council's Persistent and Unreasonable Complainant Policy. The Clerk added that the email in question from Mr Thomas had been received the day before the meeting. The Council's Public Questions Policy required that such questions be submitted five clear days before the date of the meeting and that the questioner be present at the meeting. The Clerk added that none of Mr Thomas's emails had indicated any discrepancy in the accounts for 2021-22 although Mr Thomas had complained, with justification, that the Clerk had not posted a Notice of Delay on the Council website after 30 June. The Clerk believed that many emails from Mr Thomas and Graham White were attempts to get the Clerk to reveal confidential personal financial information regarding a former employee of the Council. Cllr White stated that the full documents were in his possession and that he did not need to ask any questions because he had "every piece of paper that was ever produced" regarding the former employee.

5. BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2022-23

The Clerk presented details of the expenditure incurred by the Council for the year to date. He said that expenditure on staff, youth engagement and Members' allowances was predictable and relatively fixed. Other expenditure was dependent on the Council's combined resources in terms of the time and capabilities of its Members

and officers. The Council was almost one third of the way through the year but only one sixth of this section of its budget had been spent. Expenditure on these items so far in 2022-23 was almost exactly the same as at this point in the previous year. The evidence was beginning to mount that, although the Council had set a much higher precept for 2022-23, its expenditure may not be significantly more than the previous year. The Clerk forecast that the amount of public money held by the Council was likely to have increased by tens of thousands of pounds by the end of the current financial year. He suggested that the Council needed to put together long-term plans to reduce the amount of public money it was holding. He intended to work with the Council's Finance and Grants Committee to draw up relevant recommendations and proposals that would inform the Council's budget-setting process later in the year.

6. **PAPERLESS MEETINGS – BARRIE PAGE AND PETER ADAMSON**

Peter Adamson presented calculations that showed that the Council spent hundreds of pounds – and many hours of officers' time – each year providing printed papers for Council meetings.

Rob Phillips left the meeting at 8.26 pm and returned at 8.29 pm.

Barrie Page showed evidence that the energy costs of the manufacture and transport of the paper alone ran to nearly 60,000 watt-hours. A laptop computer could run for an hour on less energy than it took to produce a single sheet of paper. While the energy costs of manufacturing a new laptop were high, the use of existing laptops or the purchase of second-hand equipment left little additional environmental footprint.

Bernard Wall left the meeting at 8.40 pm and returned at 8.41 pm.

The Council **RESOLVED** that it will support paperless meetings by encouraging Members to use their own laptops, rather than printed paper, in meetings;

The Council **RESOLVED** that, if any Member is unwilling or unable to use their own laptop, officers shall be authorised to purchase a second-hand laptop computer, tablet or e-reader plus any necessary training for the use of that Member;

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise the necessary expenditure from the 'Members' IT Equipment' budget.

7. **COMMITTEE VACANCIES**

The Clerk reminded Members that Beverley Lucas had resigned as a Member of the Council on 1 July and two committees of which former-councillor Lucas had been a member now had fewer than the minimum number of Members.

Roger Clark suggested that a letter should be sent to former-councillor Lucas thanking her for services. The Public Services Ombudsman had found that she had been bullied by another Council Member in 2019. Cllr Clark believed that the bullying had continued after that time and the letter should acknowledge that. The Clerk replied that he had spoken to former-councillor Lucas and had promised to write to her. The Clerk said he also recognised that he had yet to write to the Members who left the Council in May to formally thank them for their services to the Council.

Josh Rawcliffe and Graham White volunteered to fill the vacancy on the HR Committee. The Clerk reminded Members that Cllr White had previously been a member of the HR Committee but, in February 2021, Council had resolved to deselected him from the committee after he was found to be in breach of confidence. Earlier this year, Cllr White had again been in breach of confidence concerning a

personnel matter and the Clerk was of the opinion that Cllr White was seeking reappointment to the HR Committee because he believed it would give him access to privileged and confidential personal information about the Council's current and former staff. If Cllr White was appointed to the HR Committee, the Clerk would refuse to provide the committee with confidential or personal information and would refuse to take part in meetings of the committee where he may be asked about confidential or personal information. Cllr White pointed out that, when the Council reported him to the Public Services Ombudsman over an alleged breach of confidentiality, the Ombudsman had not taken the matter further. Bernard Wall said that he believed that the Clerk was criticising Cllr White unnecessarily. Cllr White was "as straight as a die" and past officers and the current Clerk were wrong.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Josh Rawcliffe as a member of the HR Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Rob Phillips as a member of the Finance and Grants Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Josh Rawcliffe as a member of the People and Communities Committee.

8. BLAENAU GWENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE – NICK SIMMONS

The Council **RESOLVED** to suspend Standing Order 3x to enable the meeting to continue for more than two hours.

The Vice Chair left the meeting at 9.04 pm.

The Chair said that he believed that the Council's participation in meetings of the Joint Committee of Local Councils in Blaenau Gwent and the Consultation with Blaenau Gwent Council would be strengthened if the Council's nominees were formalised into a committee that would seek the agreed views of Council and mandate members of the committee to represent those views.

The Council **RESOLVED** that the Council's nominees to the Joint Committee of Local Councils in Blaenau Gwent shall be constituted as the Blaenau Gwent Consultative Committee of the Council and to appoint Glyn Smith, Roger Clark, Graham White, Bernard Wall and Nick Simmons to the committee.

A motion to agree the terms of reference of the committee was not moved. Graham White moved that the committee should draft its own terms of reference.

The Council **RESOLVED** that the committee shall draft its terms of reference, which will be submitted for ratification at a future meeting of the Council.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

28 September 2022

The meeting ended at 9.12 pm.