

## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **MUNICIPAL YEAR 2018/2019**

#### **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**08<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2019**

#### **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

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#### **1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with a detailed update on the progress made in advancing the core commitments of the Council over the last financial year.

#### **2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members note and scrutinise the content of the report.

#### **3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To challenge any arising matters or issues with the Council Leader that the portfolio is responsible for and to ensure that the appropriate mechanisms are in place to effectively scrutinise the Executive.

#### **4.0 BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 On the 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2018, Members of the Council were provided with an oral update on the delivery of key projects and services by the Leader through the annual State of the County Borough debate. Due to time constraints on the agenda item and the meeting, however, the Leader was not able to provide an update on all service areas
- 4.2 As part of this Council's ongoing commitment to improve the function of Scrutiny as a critical-friend of the Council, this item is being brought before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the Cabinet Member engagement sessions for the first time.
- 4.3 Such an approach will provide Scrutiny Members with the opportunity to further challenge the Executive, as the Leader can provide further details

relating to the potential challenges facing the Council's services, as well as the opportunities and capital investment currently being pursued.

## **5.0 BUDGET**

- 5.1 The continuation of austerity for a ninth consecutive year necessitates that the Local Authority's budget remains a core priority and the Council is continuing to manage its finances in a proactive and prudent manner.
- 5.2 The Council has recently closed the six week consultation process on bridging a £5.9m budget gap for 2019/20, which is a significant improvement on the previous in-year forecasts of £17m and £9.9m. This improved position is due to a slightly better than expected provisional settlement from the Welsh Government and the successful attainment of the Council's ambitious target of over £6m in efficiency savings.
- 5.3 In the current financial year, RCT set the lowest Council Tax rise in Wales at 3.3% and this followed on from the previous two financial years, where the lowest local increases were set over consecutive years at 2.5% and 2.25% respectively. The administration has always sought to avoid transferring the strain of austerity to residents and key frontline services, where possible. The Council intends to continue this in 2019/20 and is currently consulting on a slight increase of around 3% once again.
- 5.4 Currently, residents in RCT pay below the Welsh average and the sixth lowest Council Tax in Wales based on the average paid per dwelling, as shown below. Members are advised to note that the demographics of RCT define the Authority's Council Tax base levels, with 103,535, or 43%, of dwellings in the County Borough classed as Band A, with the combined percentage of 81.25% for the total number of Bands A-C. By contrast, Cardiff only have 3% of dwellings classified as Band A and 35.76% of dwellings in Bands A-C.

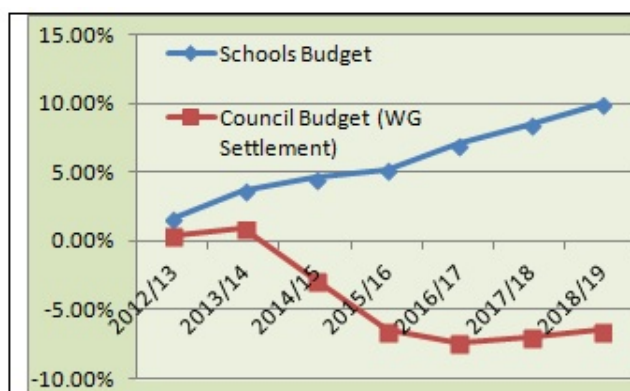
<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Average Council Tax per Dwelling – 18/19</b>
Caerphilly	£1,017
Newport	£1,152
Blaenau Gwent	£1,162
Pembrokeshire	£1,183
Merthyr Tydfil	£1,188
<b>RCT</b>	<b>£1,209</b>
Torfaen	£1,250
Carmarthenshire	£1,276
Wrexham	£1,277
Swansea	£1,290
Neath Port Talbot	£1,312
Anglesey/Ynys Mon	£1,313
<b>Wales Average</b>	<b>£1,319</b>
Conwy	£1,331
Cardiff	£1,389
Denbighshire	£1,409
Flintshire	£1,417
Bridgend	£1,420
Ceredigion	£1,433
Gwynedd	£1,441
Powys	£1,455
Vale of Glamorgan	£1,516
Monmouthshire	£1,732

## **6.0 SCHOOLS & EDUCATION**

- 6.1 The Council is continuing to progress the £160m Band A phase of the Welsh Government supported 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools initiative, and, over the summer, a number of projects to deliver enhanced educational facilities in the Rhondda, Tonyrefail and Cwmaman were completed.
- 6.1.1 Completed projects include: Cwmaman Community School (£7.2m); Ysgol Nantgwyn (£13.5m); Porth Community School (£12m); Ferndale Community School (£2m); Treorchy Comprehensive (£12.2m); YGG Llwyncelyn (£250,000); Cymmer Primary (£2.2m); YGG Tonyrefail (£1m); and the primary phase of Tonyrefail 3-19, with work on-going to deliver the secondary phase of the scheme.
- 6.2 An additional total investment of £8m, including £5m of planned capital works to reduce the backlog of maintenance and repairs and £2m in revenue to fund minor repairs to schools, has seen over 75 individual maintenance projects completed this year. £1m of this funding has also delivered modern and improved dining facilities in schools across RCT.
- 6.3 A further £3.5m will be invested in six schools through the Welsh Language Early Years Capital Grant (YGG Ynyswen, YGG Evan James, YG Llanhari, YGG Abercynon, YGG Llantrisant and YGG Aberdar). Three schools will also benefit from a further £1.6m to reduce class sizes (Parc Lewis, Llanharan and Gelli Primary Schools); whilst funding for additional teachers will be made available in six schools. Ffynnon Taf Primary will also receive £995,000 (CIL and Capital funding) to construct an extension, with work starting next summer.
- 6.4 The Council recently confirmed that a further tranche of £168m had been agreed with the Welsh Government to deliver the Band B phase of the scheme between 2019 and 2026. This will take the Council's total investment package to £328m, and will represent the most significant investment in education by any Welsh Local Authority. As part of this, the Council is consulting on proposals to improve education in the northern Cynon Valley by making Penderyn Community Primary School a solely Welsh Medium provision, along with a new build for Hirwaun Primary (£10.4m), a new extension for YGG Aberdar (£3.3m) and also for YG Rhydywaun (£10.2m). The Council is also proposing major investment in the wider Pontypridd area and the consultation on these proposals has recently concluded with Cabinet considering the outcomes in the near future.
- 6.5 2018/19 also saw the Council deliver on its commitment to increase the Schools Education Budget through a £2m (1.4%) increase, which was double the original commitment of at least £1m. As the table below shows, over the course of the nine years of austerity to impact on local government, this

Council has increased the ISB consecutively in each financial year, and, as part of the budget setting process for 2019/20, is proposing an increase of at least £2.2m - with further funding contingent on extra funding passed on through the Local Government settlement. This means that the ISB has received an increase of 9.91% since 2012/13, whilst other Council budgets have been reduced by 6.48%. In monetary terms, this is an increase of £22.5m over the same period. It is acknowledged that the increase for 2018/19 was not wholly sufficient in addressing the total shortfall in the schools budget, as inflationary pressures continue to present a significant challenge to the service area along with the contribution that local government must find to fund the teacher's pay increase.

Year	School (ISB) Increase	RCT Settlement Level
2012/13	+1.58%	+0.42%
2013/14	+2.08%	+0.5%
2014/15	+0.9%	-3.7%
2015/16	+0.6%	-3.7%
2016/17	+1.85%	-0.9%
2017/18	+1.5%	+0.4%
2018/19	+1.4%	+0.5%



### ATTAINMENT

- 6.6 In general, schools across Rhondda Cynon Taf continue to demonstrate reasonable stability across all Stage levels of assessment. This should be noted in consideration of the levels of deprivation present in Rhondda Cynon Taf compared with many other Local Authorities.
- 6.7 The provisional outcomes suggested that there was a small general dip in performance across the Key Stages, although it is important to consider a number of factors including curriculum changes and changes in expectations for outcomes. Nevertheless, attainment remains an area that the Council will be targeting and looking to improve on to carry on the trend of positive results over previous years.

In Key Stage 2, the Core subject areas were at their 2<sup>nd</sup> highest level since 2013 and RCT pupils performed above Welsh average for the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 or above in Welsh (first language).

At Key Stage 3 level, Secondary Schools made good progress in 3 out of the 5 KPIs, with a further one measure remaining stable and English scoring 0.2% above the all-Wales average.

At KS4, Level 1 outcomes were above the regional and national averages in 2017/18; with Level 2 and Level 2+ outcomes demonstrating good progress, as RCT now ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in Wales on Level 2+ measures which is well above expected outcomes. Level 2+ outcomes improved by 3.3% which is greater than both regional and national progress and also closed the gap between RCT and the Welsh Average to a historic low (2.2%points). A\*-C outcomes in English improved by 1.2 %points and mathematics by 2.1 %points this academic year, although Science outcomes would benefit from further improvement.

Key Stage 5 performance at the National Level 3 threshold indicator suggests that the outcomes are just below the regional and national average by 1.7%points and 1.4%points respectively for 2017/18, although 96.2% of learners successfully achieved the Level 3 threshold. It is also worth noting that KS5 results have remained relatively stable and significant improvements in the wider point score was evident for all RCT learners - particularly in terms of the percentage of learners achieving 3 A-A\* and 3 A\*-C grades.

Particular improvement is, however, needed in Welsh & Science (KS4), Maths Development (Foundation phase) and Science at KS2 level. The Welsh Government's changes to the Key Stage 4 stage examinations have demonstrated a decrease in performance for 2017, and performance must be monitored closely to ensure that this is merely transitional and reflects the way in which performance is assessed.

- 6.8 Members will be aware that Rhondda Cynon Taf has the third highest level of pupils eligible for free school meals, behind Blaenau Gwent and Neath Port Talbot. Whilst this should not be utilised as an excuse for instances of poor performance, there is a tangible cause and effect relationship between the two. The Council has worked hard to weaken this link over recent years, particularly through initiatives such as the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP), which was extended to five schools (Glenboi, Heol-Y-Celyn, Maerdy, Penywaun and Ysgol Hen Felin) based on the high percentage of pupils accessing FSMs. This summer, 180 individual pupils attended 60 sessions, with over 1,260 meals for pupils and 273 parents being served.

## **7.0 HIGHWAYS & STRATEGIC PROJECTS**

- 7.1 Members will note that the Cabinet recently approved a 3-year, £23.5m highways improvement scheme to accelerate the Council's approach to improving transport links across the County Borough. In 2011/12, the percentage of classified roads in the red condition category (those requiring attention) was 15.7%, with the sustained investment of almost £100m seeing

the percentage cut by over 50% in 2017/18 at 7.2%. Further investment over the 18/19 financial year has seen a further improvement to just 4.8% overall, allowing the Council to reinvest revenue savings from less claims.

- 7.2 Since 2011/12, the Council has undertaken over 1,000 carriageway and 350 footway schemes, with over 150 carriageway and 100 footway schemes completed since October 2017. A number of major schemes have been progressed and completed throughout the course of the financial year, including the substantial Beddau Halt junction improvements - delivered through £680,000 of Welsh Government funding - and the associated Gwaunmiskin Road resurfacing (£180,000 through #RCTInvest). Additionally, works have been completed ahead of schedule on the remodelling of the layout of the Tonypany Town Centre, the creation of extra lanes on the A4119 at Talbot Green lights and the widening of Club Street in Aberaman.
- 7.3 In addition to this, 33 structures have benefited from the Council's investment since 2011, with £7.394m allocated to improvements in the current financial year and £6.007m of the funding to carry out works to structures in the Rhondda constituency area.
- 7.4 To complement the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools developments, the Council has also delivered a number of Safer Routes schemes over the summer in Porth, Ystrad, Tonypany, Tonyrefail, Treorchy and Cwmaman. This programme has installed road safety features, such as speed humps and improved road crossings to ensure that children are able to travel safely to school.
- 7.5 In anticipation of the development of the South Wales Metro, the Council is continuing to undertake work to increase the capacity of Park and Ride facilities across the County Borough. Phase I of the project to create extra spaces at Pont-Y-Clun has been completed and funding has also been committed to carry out viability works for the progression to Phase II of the scheme. Phase II of the Abercynon Park and Ride scheme has already commenced and the completion of this stage will see an extra 310 spaces created at the popular site. Further studies are also being carried out at the Porth Bus Interchange to allow for better parking and connectivity as part of the wider Porth regeneration project.
- 7.6 Further work has also been undertaken to develop the County Borough's Active Travel network, in line with Welsh Government requirements. A £375,000 Welsh Government investment enabled the completion of the Llantrisant Community Route in December 2017; whilst feasibility studies are being carried out in the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr to ascertain how the Council can provide a joined-up Active Travel network throughout the Rhondda. With this in mind, the Council has committed its support to the reopening of both the Rhondda Tunnel and the Abernant Tunnel, in

recognition of the opportunities that the success of these projects would have in terms of tourism and Active Travel, with £250,000 recently secured to advance the studies.

- 7.7 Good progress has also been made in the progression of key highways schemes that the Council has committed to delivering over the course of this Council term.
- 7.7.1 The Mountain Ash Cross Valley Link scheme has reached a significant number of milestones this year and work to construct the main bridge and the associated highways works commenced in July, with the project set for completion by the winter of 2019/20.
- 7.7.2 Cabinet Members recently committed an additional £1.5m to support the key dualling of the strategic A4119, following the approval of its progression in June. The allocated funding will allow preliminary design and ecological surveys to be carried out, as well as the advanced purchasing of third party land, which will ultimately determine the pace of the scheme's delivery. Stages 1 and 2 of the WeITAG assessments have already been completed with progression to Stage 3 commissioned. As part of these improvements, the Council is also looking to make improvements to the Nant Eirin and Trebanog roundabouts immediately north of Coed Ely via the £300,000 of Making Better Use programme funding secured this year.
- 7.7.3 The Council's Cabinet have also committed £500,000 to allow for the preliminary design studies to commence for the delivery of the final section of the Llanharan Bypass, which has long been an aspiration for local residents. The completion of this stage of the process will allow the preferred route to be identified and possibly constructed in advance of the middle section of the scheme, which is to be developed by the housing provider as part of the conditions for development.
- 7.7.4 In addition to both of these schemes, the Council has also committed funding to support two schemes that are to be progressed in addition to the commitments of the Council. £1m has been allocated to support the extension of the Aberdare Bypass to the Croesbychan Roundabout, aligning with the Welsh Government's major dualling of the A465. Given the level of future development of the A465, the Bypass extension is seen to be a vital scheme and the Welsh Government have affirmed Ministerial support for the Council to deliver the scheme. In the Rhondda, a further £200,000 has been committed carrying out initial works on the possibility of creating a new Treorchy-Gelli Link Road, which would help alleviate the congestion around the Stag Square area.



## **8.0 TOWN CENTRES, ENTERPRISE AND REGENERATION**

### Town Centres

- 8.1 Over the last year, the Council has continued to display its commitment to supporting the County Borough's town centres by building on measures already successfully introduced like the free/reduced car parking initiative.
- 8.2 The initial pilot of the Town Centre Maintenance Grant in the Tonypany and Mountain Ash retail areas has proven successful, and the scheme has recently been expanded to cover the Treorchy retail area. To date, the Council has received 102 applications across the three town centres. At the last meeting of Full Council, the Council Leader announced that the Council's Cabinet would shortly be considering proposals to further extend the scheme to Aberdare, Porth and Ferndale in the 2019/20 Financial Year.
- 8.3 Across the County, the Council is also continuing to support town centres through the annual Christmas events programme. For 2018/19, the budget for the Christmas lighting was maintained and each town centre also received £4,000 in support for their respective town centre Christmas events. By comparison, many other Welsh Local Authorities have cut their Christmas budgets.
- 8.4 In Aberdare, the Council has undertaken work and supported a range of initiatives, including the opening of the Gadlys Car Park as a permit-only facility to improve the parking offer for shoppers and traders; the hosting of the Cynon Growth Event on the 15<sup>th</sup> November, providing businesses with an opportunity to network and receive information and support. The Council has also developed a BID feasibility study in Aberdare and Treorchy via Welsh Government funding - the outcomes of the final reports are due in early 2019.
- 8.5 The Council is continuing to develop a positive relationship with the Treorchy Chamber of Trade and is supporting an application to the Pen-Y-Cymoedd wind farm development to bring about the "Visit Treorchy" project. This will entail the creation of online and social media content, as well as tourism books to attract visitors to Treorchy and the wider County Borough. The Local Authority is also in the process of installing new male/female and accessible toilets at the rear of Treorchy Library (£110,000).
- 8.6 Tonypany has also recently benefited from the major remodelling works that were completed ahead of schedule. The project was one of the most substantial undertaken by the Council in this financial year, and the town centre has now had new street furniture installed, along with the creation of new limited waiting and loading bays and a new bus stop delivered as part of the scheme. Further works will be completed in the New Year to improve footways between the Welcome Inn and Iceland. The Council has also

secured £136,000 of Welsh Government funding to improve the interior of Tonypandy Library and works on this project are set to shortly be completed.

- 8.7 The Council has recently held an exhibition in Mountain Ash to give residents the opportunity to view the Council's plans for delivering the developments that will include a new primary care centre (delivered by the Cwm Taf UHB and supported by RCTCBC), a new Extra Care facility, the redevelopment of the current Day Centre into a Community Hub and the redevelopment of the currently vacant 1-4 Oxford Buildings. It is intended that the fulfilment of the plans will allow the town centre to explore new opportunities and boost the local economy.
- 8.8 Public consultation on the Council's proposals for the regeneration of Porth Town Centre has recently concluded and an report will be brought before the Cabinet in the near future. Pending approval of the recommendations, Porth could be set to benefit from significant investment under the plans, which would see the town turned into a prosperous and attractive location that offers a wide range of opportunities for residents and traders, centred around the Porth Transport Hub and a much-regenerated Station Quarter. The Council has also supported the re-establishment of the Porth Chamber of Trade and is now working to develop an action plan to facilitate the spending of Aldi Section 106 money; whilst close collaboration with the Chamber of Trade and Avant Cymru enabled the successful delivery of the Festy Porth event to mark the reopening of the town from the Welsh Water works.
- 8.9 Recently, the Council has also launched the Hop, Shop and Save Scheme in partnership with Stagecoach. This innovative scheme allows businesses to advertise themselves on buses in return for discounts for Stagecoach customers.

#### Modern Business Units

- 8.10 The Council is continuing to support employment and enterprise in the County Borough and has recently secured a significant £5.158m EU funding to progress the development of modern business units in Robertstown and Coed Ely. RCTCBC is also contributing £1.350m to the Coed Ely scheme and a total £2.850m to the Robertstown scheme.
- 8.11 Good progress is also being made in the delivery of the circa £48m Taff Vale development, with the structure for "Building C" erected. The Council has already announced that Transport for Wales will occupy some of the space in the office-led aspect. The flagship project is central to the wider regeneration of Pontypridd Town and will see around 1,000 jobs coming into the town area.

- 8.12 RCT is continuing to prove itself to be an increasingly attractive location for employers, with recent announcements that the DWP and the Welsh Revenue Authority will be based in the Treforest area.

### Empty Properties

- 8.13 The Council recognises that empty properties are a blight on our communities and undertaken a number of measures to reduce the amount across the entire County Borough. The Empty Properties Grant has proven to be a successful scheme since its inception, with almost 250 individual cases processed to date. In the 17/18 financial year, 73 cases were resolved at a value of £1.4m.
- 8.14 The Houses into Homes scheme has also seen 74 loans completed since 2012, creating 106 units. A further 4 loans have been approved and are awaiting payment, which will eventually lead to the creation of 10 further units.

## **9.0 LEISURE AND PLAY AREAS**

- 9.1 Over the course of the last year, the Council has continued to deliver significant investment in both indoor and outdoor leisure facilities across the County Borough. In January 2018, the Llantrisant Leisure Centre benefited from a refurbishment and new equipment in a £350,000 investment. A significant development of the Rhondda Fach Sports Centre is also nearing completion, with the £1m scheme seeing two indoor 3G surfaces installed on the site as part of the substantial remodelling and refurbishment of the facility.
- 9.2 Changing rooms have also been upgraded at three leisure centres - Bronwydd Swimming Pool (£200,000) in April 2018; Rhondda Sports Centre (£360,000) in August 2018; and Abercynon Sports Centre in November (£220,000). This programme will shortly extend to the Michael Sobell Centre in Aberdare. The Council has also completed a further £210,000 project to replace the air handling and ventilation units, as well as refurbishing the pool tank liner at Abercynon Sports Centre.
- 9.3 Good progress has been made in the delivery of more 3G facilities, with the current financial year seeing projects completed in Abercynon (£457,000), YG Garth Olwg (£377,898), Porth Community School (£580,000) and Ferndale Comprehensive School (£868,206). These projects take the total number of facilities delivered to 11 across the County Borough and work is currently ongoing at both YG Rhydywaun and Bryncelynnog Comprehensive School to deliver two further facilities. The Council is also exploring options for the development of an additional facility in the northern Rhondda Fawr to deliver on the Local Authority's ambition of providing residents with access to a 3G facility within a 3 mile radius of their home, no matter where they live.

- 9.4 The Council has also invested in the delivery of outdoor athletics facilities with the £3m Ron Jones Stadium and Danny Evans stand in Aberdare opening earlier this year, providing local sports clubs and Aberdare Community School with a state-of-the-art facility to benefit from. The ambition of the Council is to provide athletics facilities in each of the three constituent areas of RCT and the Council has already announced that the Bryncelynnog 3G facility will have an outdoor athletics facility as part of the wider package. In the Rhondda, feasibility works are also being carried out to explore the possibilities for making improvements to the playing fields and athletics track at the King George V facility in Clydach Vale. It is hoped that a further announcement on this will be made in the coming months.
- 9.5 Continuing with the improvement programme for children's play facilities remains a core commitment of the Council, and the end of this financial year will see a further 27 projects completed. Since the commencement of the programme in 2015, almost 100 play areas (50% of the current stock) has benefited from over £3.2m of investment, with this constituting over half of the total play area improvements in the whole of Wales.

## **10.0 SOCIAL SERVICES**

- 10.1 Ongoing austerity dictates that, like Councils across the UK, social services are being placed under increasing strain due to reduced funding and continual increases in the demands placed on the service.
- 10.2 Good progress continues to be made in the delivery of the Maesyffynnon Extra Care facility in Aberaman, with the delivery of the modules expected to commence in early January. The Council is also in the process of consulting on proposals to modernise the system of care provided to elderly residents in the County Borough.
- 10.3 The award winning Stay Well @ Home service was recently recognised in the Social Care and Health awards. This scheme continues to successfully help people to stay in their own homes and to get hospital discharges effected as soon as possible, and since October 2017, the scheme has successfully supported over 330 referrals, helping to alleviate some of the strain on the health service over the winter period.
- 10.4 In keeping with the Local Authority's commitment to supporting independent living, the Council provides 1,408 adult Home Care packages, totalling 16,643 hours a week; whilst 537 Direct Payments are provided to 150 children and 387 adults at a combined total of 9,159 hours a week.
- 10.5 RCT Council also provides support through a range of other schemes, including the Disabled Facilities Grant, which has seen a total of 310 delivered in 17/18 and a further 216 delivered in this financial year; the ENABLE grant,

which has supported 790 people since 2017 at an approximate cost of £360,000; the Handyperson scheme, which will see a total of £120,000 worth of support delivered between 2017/18 and the end of this financial year; and the Maintenance Repair Assistance Grant, which has seen 120 projects completed to date at a cost of £444,155.

- 10.6 The Resilient Families (RF) service is also now in place, which is designed to support and respond to families that are experiencing difficulties. Over 1,200 families have been referred since January 2018 (35% more than expected) and over 240 families have stepped down to the RF service from statutory Children's Services, with just under 30% of those referred coming through self-referrals.
- 10.7 The Council is continuing to work with partners on the Cwm Taf Social Services & Wellbeing Partnership (Regional Partnership Board) in accessing the Integrated Care Fund, which allows for the introduction of new service models. Some of these are already in operation, such as the enhanced Reablement Service for people suffering with dementia, the Early Stroke Discharge Service, and the Community Coordinators scheme. Work is also ongoing to deliver the Integrated Autism Service across the regional area.
- 10.8 Continued austerity necessitates that the Council has to make the most of the services it provides to residents and the ongoing programme of investment to establish Community Hubs is reflective of this approach as the provision of a number of services in one location not only improves accessibility for residents, but also allows the Council to make its estates more efficient. The Council has worked closely with Age Connects Morgannwg to access £1.1m of Big Lottery funding following the Community Asset Transfer of the St. Mair's Day Centre in Aberdare. The facility will be given a new identity as Cynon Linc and will feature improved activities and resources for users of the service. The Council is in the process of establishing similar schemes in Mountain Ash and Ferndale, where grant funding totalling £306,000 (£206,000 from Pen-Y-Cymoedd and £100,000 from the Integrated Care Fund) has been secured. Plans for a Community Hub in Porth have recently been consulted on as part of the wider regeneration strategy, and the results will be reported back to Cabinet in the near future.

## **11.0 WELSH GOVERNMENT CHILDCARE OFFER**

- 11.1 The Council has now rolled out the Welsh Government's Childcare Offer after being chosen as one of the initial seven Local Authority pilot areas.
- 11.2 Rollout of the scheme commenced in September 2017 and was incrementally expanded in a phased approach to cover an increasing number of wards in the County Borough. The initial scheme was based on school catchment

areas, although a move to full electoral ward coverage was adopted to make the process easier to administer and to simplify the eligibility for parents.

- 11.3 To date, almost 1000 parents have applied to take advantage of the offer. These numbers are slightly below the national average. Reasons for this include that Foundation Phase nursery education provision is quite generous in RCT compared to some other Local Authorities, so many children are accessing a higher proportion of education and don't need additional childcare. Also, informal childcare (particularly friends and family) is prevalent in RCT, and particularly in the Valley communities. Other early implementers Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly have seen similar trends with this.
- 11.4 Childcare providers have generally been positive about delivering the offer to eligible children and the Council is aware of only a couple of providers who have made the decision not to participate. RCTCBC is currently working with Flintshire County Council to purchase their bespoke online system so that providers can claim their funding via an online portal as opposed to the current arrangement which is through secure spreadsheet.
- 11.5 In the New Year, RCT Council will, at the request of the Welsh Government, be supporting Merthyr Tydfil CBC to implement the offer by administering their parent applications and provider claims, and the Council will also be providing similar assistance to Bridgend CBC from April 2019.

## **12.0 CORPORATE - EMPLOYMENT & EQUALITIES**

- 12.1 The Council is continuing to make good progress on the commitment to provide at least 150 apprentice and graduate positions over the course of this Council term. In the two financial years of the term so far, 22 graduates and 59 apprentices have been recruited, with an additional seven temporary positions also filled since. Over 1,000 applications were received for Cohort 7, which commenced their employment in September, and the high volume of applications highlights the level of appeal that the Council's successful employment programme has.
- 12.2 In total, 186 apprentices have been recruited through the scheme since September 2012 and the Council was recently named Employer of the Year at the National Training Awards Cymru. 100% of the Council's apprentices are gaining their qualification framework (levels 2-5) and a further 92% are securing sustainable employment. Additionally, 140 work experience placements have been established from over 200 requests between January and August 2018.
- 12.3 On a wider level, the Council is continuing to support residents into employment locally via the hosting of the increasingly popular careers fairs events. The two fairs held in 2018 attracted over 1,000 people of all ages and

it was also attended by over 70 employers across a range of services in the private and public sectors.

- 12.4 The Council is continuing to achieve excellent outcomes through its Children Looked After programmes like the Step in the Right Direction and Care2Work schemes, and RCT is the leading Local Authority in Wales for the delivery of innovative initiatives for young people in the County Borough. The aim is for the Council to continue to develop the existing programmes, whilst also looking to provide work experience opportunities for residents with additional needs and also looking to provide support to SMEs within the County Borough.
- 12.5 Internally, the Council's Equalities team has delivered training and support across the various service areas to ensure that the Authority is delivering on its equality objectives as a corporate body. For the second consecutive year, RCTCBC ranked amongst Stonewall's Top 100 Employers for the inclusivity displayed and the support given to employees identifying with the LGBTQ+ community. No other Welsh Local Authority featured on the list and the Council is continuing to demonstrate and improve its level of support and provision to staff.
- 12.6 Additionally, the Local Authority has maintained its level of support to the local Armed Forces community through a number of avenues, and RCT is still the only Welsh Council to be in receipt of the Ministry of Defence's Armed Forces Gold Award. The ongoing programme of events hosted across the County throughout the year, such as Armed Forces Day and the Festival of Remembrance, has been complemented by memorial celebrations, including the dedicating of the Freedom of the Borough to RAF St. Athan and the centenary event for George Prowse VC. In conjunction, the Local Authority is continuing its work to develop the commitments to the County's Armed Forces community through the Armed Forces Covenant by engaging with and offering support to veterans and active servicemen and women. A further example of the Council's ongoing support for the Armed Forces community can be seen in the introduction of the pilot scheme for discounted burials for Armed Forces Personnel, with the scheme to be reviewed in 2019/20 with the possibility of extending the scheme once a clearer picture of the demand can be obtained.

### **13.0 CONCLUSION**

- 13.1 Despite prolonged public sector austerity continuing to dominate local government, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council is continuing to demonstrate a proactive approach to managing its finances. The Council Tax rises set over the previous three financial years have been amongst the lowest levels in Wales and the achieving of £6m in efficiency savings demonstrate that the

Council is seeking to protect both its residents and frontline services from the worst effects of austerity. The better-than-expected Provisional Local Government Settlement means that the Council must close an anticipated budget gap of £5.9m and has recently completed its annual budget consultation process as part of the formulations for the forthcoming financial year.

- 13.2 The significant programme of capital investment across all service areas is continuing to deliver visible and tangible improvements to communities across Rhondda Cynon Taf, and the Council looks set to go over and above in delivering on its commitments by the close of this Council term, with the full rollout of the Welsh Government's Free Childcare offer marking the first priority to be fully delivered.