

START WELL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 10th November, 2025.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

The recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor R.R. Thomas (Chair); Councillor H.M. Payne (Vice-Chair); Councillors A. Asbrey, J. Aviet, W. Gilligan, E. Goodjohn, S.J. Haines, S.M. Hanks, W.A. Hennessy and J. Lynch-Wilson.

Co-opted Members: L. Barrowclough (Parent Governor – Primary Sector), Dr. M. Price (Roman Catholic Church), K. Riddick (Parent Governor – Secondary Sector), M. Werrett (Church in Wales), A. Emmerson and R. Goodjohn (Vale Youth Forum); G. Scott (Welsh Medium Education), P. Bond and R. Davies (Vale Youth Council).

Also present: Councillors R.M. Birch (Cabinet Member for Education, Arts and the Welsh Language), L. Burnett (Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources), G. John (Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Wellbeing) and E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health).

411 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chair read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

412 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE –

This was received from Councillor N.P. Hodges.

413 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 8th September, 2025 be approved as a correct record.

414 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

Councillor J. Aviet declared a prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as a family member worked at Pencoedtre High School, and

they were also a Governor at Oakfield Primary school. The Councillor left the meeting before discussion on the item.

Councillor S. Haines declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as they were a Governor of St Athan Primary School, which was covered in the report.

Councillor J. Lynch-Wilson declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as they were a Governor of St Athan Primary School, which was covered in the report.

Councillor H. Payne declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as they were a Governor of Palmerston Primary School, which was covered in the report.

L. Barrowclough (Co-opted Member) declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as their family member attended Ysgol Y Deri.

Dr. M. Price (Co-opted Member) declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as he was a Governor of St Richard Gwyn School, which was covered in the report.

K. Riddick (Co-opted Member) declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Summary of Estyn Inspection Outcomes for Summer Term 2025 and Update on Schools in Statutory Follow-Up – as they were a Governor of Pencoedre and Whitmore High Schools.

415 TO CONFIRM VOTING RIGHTS FOR CO-OPTED MEMBERS OF THE START WELL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the voting rights for those Co-Opted Members present at the Committee meeting be noted.

Reason for recommendation

To confirm the agenda items and voting rights for those Co-Opted Members present at the meeting with voting rights.

416 WELSH LANGUAGE STANDARDS ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT 2024-2025 (REF) –

The reference from Cabinet of 4th September, 2025 as contained within the agenda was presented by the Operational Manager - Corporate Communications,

Participation, Equalities & Directorate Development.

The report covered compliance with Welsh language standards and the delivery of the Council's Welsh language promotion strategy.

Highlights for 2024/25 included:

- Introduction of a new Welsh language skills assessment tool for staff, simplifying skill logging;
- Launch of a Welsh language internet hub for colleagues, providing translation services and learning opportunities;
- Trial and rollout of "Cyfieithu Cyflym," a machine translation tool for Welsh speakers, enabling near real-time translation and financial savings;
- Low number of staff enrolling in traditional in-house Welsh language courses led to new shorter, taster courses with positive uptake;
- Only six formal Welsh language complaints received during the year; half related to objections to bilingual communications rather than standard breaches.

Future focus areas for 2025-26 included:

- Increasing staff learning Welsh and using Welsh in the workplace;
- Enhancing promotional campaigns linked to cultural days;
- Aligning Welsh language education strategy with the Welsh language promotion strategy;
- Expanding the forum network for Welsh language promotion;
- Experimenting with bilingual social media content to increase Welsh exposure.

Appendix Two to the report provided an update on the Council's Welsh language promotion strategy. That work included the launch of a campaign promoting Welsh medium education and bilingualism, including videos developed collaboratively with schools and community partners.

P. Bond and R. Baker (Vale Youth Council) raised that they agreed that Welsh medium education was extremely important but there should be more focus within the curriculum in terms of secondary language education and conversational skills within the English medium school settings. In reply, it was noted that there was a need for social opportunities to use Welsh beyond formal education.

Councillor A. Asbrey commented that there were accessibility issues for Welsh medium education due to transport costs in Dinas Powys.

G. Scott (Welsh Medium Education) stated that he was aware of the Welsh Language Standards as he was the Strategic Lead for the Health Board and he queried how the Council assessed its recruitment practices regarding Welsh language skills levels. In reply, the Operational Manager advised that there were currently discretionary assessments of Welsh language skills by managers, but there were plans to clarify and improve that. The Council's current planning assumptions

included the importance of making Welsh language use more comfortable within the workplace environment.

Councillor H. Payne queried the inclusion of Welsh language training as part of employee induction. The Operational Manager confirmed that the level skill was being captured when a person joined the organisation but there was a challenge to encourage staff that had joined the organisation previously to update their details. There may be merit in exploring the possibility of all new staff undertaking an introduction to Welsh training session.

The Chair referred to aims to include the participation of staff using Welsh and asked whether there were targets. The Operational Manager advised that there were no formal targets, but there was a focus on what the Council offered in terms of ongoing development of new, more accessible Welsh learning courses tailored to staff needs.

Subsequently, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the report and appendices be endorsed.

Reason for recommendation

To allow the report to be published and to allow the Council to meet its reporting duty to the Welsh Commissioner as part of the Welsh Language Standards.

417 PRESENTATION: SCHOOL BUDGET RECOVERY PLANS – UPDATE FROM TREVOR BAKER, HEAD OF STRATEGY, COMMUNITY LEARNING AND RESOURCES –

The presentation referenced the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) “State of Education in Wales” report highlighting national pressures including funding challenges, rising Additional Learning Needs (ALN) demands, pay awards, pensions, inflation, transport costs, and increasing school budget deficits.

The Vale of Glamorgan was ranked fifth lowest in Wales for spend per pupil but fourth highest in spend on ALN, reflecting prioritisation of vulnerable pupils.

In terms of the overall financial position, it was advised that:

- At 31st March, 2025, total school deficit was £4.1 million;
- Projected deficit for 2025-26 was £15.3 million, down from £16.8 million two months prior, showing slight improvement;
- 38 schools were projected to be in deficit by March 2026;
- Large variation existed between surpluses and deficits among schools, even within similar demographics.

With regard to funding sources and expenditures, it was noted that nearly 47% of Council funding was allocated to schools, with approximately 86% of school budgets being spent on staffing, with some schools spending up to 96%.

Regard efficiency savings, schools were previously protected from efficiency savings, but since April 2023 they had been required to contribute. Savings efforts included contract reviews, workforce and agency staff reductions, and procurement improvements.

The Council offered support and interventions through:

- Audit Wales reviewing school budget management; the report of that was expected soon;
- Benchmarking with other Local Authorities was ongoing to identify best practices;
- Mainstream and special school funding formula reviews conducted for transparency and equity;
- Support mechanisms included school finance officers, Human Resources partners, school-to-school training, consultants (often former headteachers), and governor training;
- School Improvement Partnership program and Education Endowment Foundation initiatives focus on curriculum basics and behaviour management;
- Transformation programs addressed procurement, workforce, and digital impact.

The Committee was advised of the deficit management framework:

- Current status was third tier intervention – supporting schools with financial challenges but not yet heavy intervention;
- 10 schools with highest deficits received informal warning notices requiring more detailed recovery plans;
- Schools had identified £700k of in-year savings and £7 million over three years, but significant challenges remained.

Councillor H. Payne queried whether schools with challenging budgets had been twinned with those with a more sustainable budget position. In reply, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources advised that school to school support could be undertaken in a range of formats, which were dependent on the challenges facing the school. For example, if there was a new headteacher in post then they may be paired with a senior headteacher were a large range of experience and knowledge. There may be occasions for the recruitment of an Executive headteacher and there was also support through a school cluster and across clusters which was not just limited to the Vale.

Dr. M. Price (Roman Catholic Church), commented that two thirds of the schools in the Vale were in deficit, and the implementation of recovery plans appeared challenging. Dr. Price queried the escalation plans of the Council for those schools that were unable to implement their school budget recovery plans and raised a concern about the capacity to intervene effectively with the large number of deficit schools. In response, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources stated that the escalation plans included several options which depended on the individual situations at the school. Options included the removal of budgetary control from a school with day-to-day financial responsibility passing to the Vale of Glamorgan Council. There were also options to strengthen the role of the Governing

Body and if necessary, provide additional training. At present, the current assumptions were that the schools were best placed to manage the deficits with support from the Council, with the Council closely monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of each school's budget recovery plan. The need for multi-year recovery plans focused on both financial and teaching/learning improvements was important, and there was a recognition that deficits were not solely due to mismanagement but also impacted because of structural and socio-economic challenges.

In terms of the Committee's future Task and Finish Group review into school budgets, it was noted that staff costs and structure would be an integral part of that groups scope and focus.

M. Werrett (Church in Wales) stated that it was important to understand that a budget deficit was not always down to mismanagement as there could be external challenges such as the rise in ALN. The wellbeing of headteachers managing those pressures was extremely important, as was balancing financial of sustainability with maintaining educational quality and safeguarding. The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources emphasised that it was recognised that there were lots of different aspects that were impacting school budgets, with those challenges extremely difficult to solve. The wellbeing of headteachers was taken extremely seriously with support including advocacy, school-to-school collaboration, and governance strengthening. The message to headteachers was that support and advice was available not only centrally.

With permission to speak, the Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources, Councillor L. Burnett, stated that there had been progress in reducing the school budget deficit but there were still massive challenges. The budget settlement from Welsh Government was pending and it was hoped that additional financial support would be forthcoming. The complexities of undertaking financial managements, which was one of the reasons for the Council developing a Corporate Landlord Strategy which would assist with managing buildings and other such as assets, and there was the possibility of adopting a similar policy for schools. The Council would support schools as best it could so that they could focus on education and learning. Working together collaboratively in a supportive way was key.

Councillor J. Aviet referred to specific challenges affecting schools such as understanding and improving school attendance, which was becoming more expensive. One of the challenges facing schools was that as schools were so entrenched in local communities that schools would be able to offer support in a wide range of areas including public health, so the role of schools in supporting families needed to be clearly defined.

Councillor R.M. Birch (Cabinet Member for Education, Arts and the Welsh Language), with permission to speak, referred to the difficulties in managing the financial aspects of a school, and range of support from the Directorate was comprehensive.

An update on school budgets and recovery plans was planned after the Christmas period with more clarity on funding.

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the presentation on School Budget Recovery Plans be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the presentation and to discussions at the meeting.

418 SUMMARY OF ESTYN INSPECTION OUTCOMES FOR SUMMER TERM 2025 AND UPDATE ON SCHOOLS IN STATUTORY FOLLOW-UP (DLS) –

Estyn inspected quality and standards in education across Wales. A new inspection framework had been introduced in September 2024. From September 2024, Estyn would be engaging more regularly with schools. Schools would now have a core inspection and an interim visit within the 6-year inspection period (2024 – 2030).

During the summer term 2025, two schools from the Vale of Glamorgan received a core inspection (Palmerston Primary and St. Richard Gwyn Catholic High School).

No follow up work was identified by Estyn in relation to Palmerston Primary. St. Richard Gwyn Catholic High School was placed in the statutory follow-up category of significant improvement.

A 'spotlight' highlighting interesting or innovative practice was included within the Palmerston Primary inspection report. This highlighted the school's effective family engagement.

During the summer term 2025, one school, Y Bont Faen Primary, received an interim visit.

Pencoedtre High School remained in special measures. The progress of the school was monitored by Estyn on a termly basis.

Fairfield Primary was in the statutory follow up category of significant improvement. The school's post-inspection action plan (PIAP) was approved by Estyn in July 2025.

Councillor W. Gilligan referred to visits to Pencoedtre on a termly basis and queried whether monthly update reports were provided. The Lead Officer for School Improvement replied that in terms of monitoring, there were multi-agency meetings that took place on a half termly basis, which included Estyn, representatives of the school, representatives from the Council included the Leader, the Cabinet Member and the Chair of Scrutiny. In those meetings a progress report would be presented by the School Improvement Officer outlining the support that the school was receiving, references to actions taken in response to each formal recommendation, an evaluation of progress made and any next steps to be considered. In terms of support to the school, that included support from the Council with Additional Learning

Needs and attendance, and there was also close links with the Central South Consortium on skills including literacy and numeracy, digital and Welsh.

Councillor H. Payne referred to the inspection of Palmerston Primary School and the need for greater recognition that 25% of children at that school had an additional learning need. It was noted that Estyn inspections would closely consider feed back provided by the school, but it was difficult for Estyn to capture all aspects within their inspection reports.

Subsequently, it was

RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T the Estyn inspection outcomes for the summer term be noted, and that Palmerston Primary be congratulated on their core inspection with no Estyn follow-up activity.

(2) T H A T the progress of Pencoedtre High School in addressing their Estyn recommendations, and the work that has begun in relation to Fairfield Primary and St Richard Gwyn Catholic High School to address the recommendations within their inspection reports, be noted.

Reason for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

419 ANNUAL SHAREHOLDER REPORT BIG FRESH CATERING COMPANY (DCR) –

The report provided an overview of the Big Fresh Catering Company Ltd's (BFCC) performance during the 2024/25 financial year. It summarised the Company's operational activity, financial position, achievements and key challenges.

BFCC continued to deliver catering services across the Vale of Glamorgan's schools, contributing to healthy eating initiatives and supporting the Council's wider priorities around well-being, sustainability and community benefit.

The Company remained financially stable but was operating within an increasingly challenging environment due to rising food, energy, and staffing costs, combined with uncertainties regarding future funding for Free School Meals (FSM) and the Universal Primary Free School Meal (UPFSM) Programme.

The Company's commercial operations, including the Pier Pavilion Café and Belle Vue Community Centre, continued to contribute to turnover but faced financial pressures as costs rose faster than income.

P. Bond and R. Baker (Vale Youth Council) raised that comments from other pupils in their school had been that the quality of food provided did not always correlate to the price paid. There were also comments made around the large sizes of queues

with little left for those at the end of the queues. In reply, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources stated that there were challenges identified in terms of addressing long queues and limited food availability in some schools. Options were explored such as multiple sittings, alternative food access points, and timetable adjustments. The need to balance the cost of meals with quality and variety amid rising food and energy costs was also closely being considered but was a significant challenge. An option being explored was around using part of the surplus to look at the diversity of food available.

Councillor H. Payne commented that it would be good to have an exploration day for new commercial and traded service opportunities and to also showcase the Company's partnerships and cultural initiatives via potential "Big Fresh Day" events.

Councillor S. Hanks queried the uncertainties around the funding of free school meals. In reply, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources advised that an announcement from Welsh Government was anticipated, but the timing of that and the detail was unknown.

Councillor J. Lynch-Wilson stated that the report was very useful, and it was good to see that, overall, the Company and been a success.

Councillor E. Goodjohn requested Member briefings on Company history, structure, and strategy. In response the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources stated that a briefing was a good idea, and he emphasised that the Catering Company operated on a non-profit basis for school meals, reinvesting surpluses to support school activities and reduce meal prices.

With permission to speak, the Executive Leader and Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources, Councillor L. Burnett, referred to benefit of the model adopted for providing school meals, which ensured that there was more control in terms of controlling prices. The Company had grown in staff and service reach since inception, demonstrating operational success and community impact. Showcasing the work of the Company was welcomed.

It was

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the contents of the Annual Shareholder annual update report for the Big Fresh Catering Company Ltd (BFCC) for the 2024/25 financial year be noted.
- (2) T H A T the ongoing financial, operational and governance arrangements in place between the Council and the Company, including the requirements of the Shareholder Committee under its Terms of Reference, be noted.
- (3) T H A T the potential for future commercial and traded service opportunities being explored by the Company, with any developments to be subject to the appropriate governance, financial appraisal and confidentiality provisions through the Shareholder Committee be noted.

Reason for recommendations

(1-3) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

420 UPDATED FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME SCHEDULE 2025/26 (DCR) –

An updated Forward Work Programme (FWP) Schedule for 2025/26 was attached at Appendix A to the report and Members of the Committee were asked to consider the contents for approval.

Updates since the Committee's approval of the FWP on 19th May, 2025 were set out in Section 2 of the report.

Updates to the 2025-26 forward work programme included:

- Addition of the school budget recovery plans presentation;
- Addition of the Big Fresh Catering Company annual report.

The next Committee meeting was scheduled for 19th January, 2026, with expected agenda items being:

- School attendance report;
- SACRE annual report for 2024-25;
- ALN task and finish review findings;
- Possible school improvement update (to be confirmed).

In addition, the Committee was Introduced to the new decision tracking system via PowerBI for more transparent and timely updates on Committee recommendations.

Subsequently, it was

RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T the Forward Work Programme Schedule for 2025/26 (Appendix A to the report) be agreed.

(2) T H A T a summary of the Decision Tracking Data relevant to the Start Well Scrutiny Committee be presented to the Committee as part of the biannual Forward Work Programme Monitoring Reports.

Reasons for recommendations

(1) To agree the items, topics and delivery methods that the Start Well Scrutiny Committee will consider for the remainder of the 2025/26 Municipal year, and to update the Forward Work Programme published on the Council's website.

(2) To provide a six-monthly update to Committee Members on the data readily available, to maintain an understanding of the Committee's impact in supporting the Council within its decision-making process.