Extraordinary meeting of Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council 3 November 2021

Ahead of the above meeting, Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council invited questions from the general public following the publication of an Audit Wales report into the Council's accounts for 2014-15.

Two questions were submitted by members of the public who attended the meeting via Zoom. They received the following responses:

Mr Anthony Partridge – Abertillery
Will the council be asking the police for a detailed reason as to why they have chosen to not carry forward a criminal investigation into the unlawful actions of Mr Bartlett in his capacity as Clerk?

It was Audit Wales that brought matters to the attention of Gwent Police, and - following a lengthy investigation - Gwent Police that then informed Audit Wales that they would not seek to pursue a prosecution.
As a matter of courtesy, Gwent Police shared the reasons for their decision with the Community Council in November 2018. The decision was taken by the Crown Prosecution Service there would not be a realistic prospect of providing the proof 'beyond reasonable doubt' required in the criminal court.
The Crown Prosecution Service will not provide more detailed or specific reasons so as not to prejudice any potential action in the civil courts, where cases are decided 'on the balance of probabilities.'

Ms Sarah Jones – Six Bells
Have all salaries and wages been audited to check for accuracy since this event and accountability steps and measures taken to ensure this doesn't happen again?

The Audit Wales report details how they carried out an audit of past payments to officers going back more than a decade before 2014-15.
From 2015-16 onwards, the Community Council's finances have been subject to an internal audit by new internal auditors and have been audited externally by Audit Wales.

(The accounts for 2014-15 onwards have not yet been published in their final form as Audit Wales had to wait for the publication of their own report before a decision can be made on how the unlawful and unauthorised payments detailed in the report will be stated in those accounts.)

Audit Wales met with the Community Council as early as December 2015 to detail their concerns about the Community Council's financial accountability.
As the Audit Wales report states right at the beginning, Audit Wales is "satisfied that, since then, the Council has made considerable efforts to improve its governance and financial management arrangements."
Examples of these improvements include:

- Officers of the Community Council are now auto-enrolled into the Local Government Pension Scheme (so there is now no question of gratuity payments being made);
- The Community Council's payroll is now administered independently by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. Nationally agreed payscales and increments are automatically included. Officers of the Community Council cannot authorise changes to salaries and individual officers cannot authorise payments to themselves.
- Expenses cannot now be paid without the express permission of the HR Committee.

- In addition, the Community Council's Finance & Grants Committee will carry out a full assessment of financial regulations in the New Year which will review all of the processes detailed in the Audit Wales report.

A number of other questions from members of the public were received that required a straightforward response. Some of these requested purely factual information; others needed to be redirected to other organisations or individuals. All of these questions received a response before the meeting of 3 November:

Mr Anthony Partridge (Abertillery)
Will the council be looking to reclaim the unlawfully gained remuneration outlined in the report, that has cost the tax payer tens of thousands of pounds?

The principal purpose of the extraordinary meeting of the Council on 3 November 2021 is to consider this issue.

Mr Martin Holt (Abertillery)
Which current Community Councillors were members of the Council during the period in question and do they intend to stand down?

Three current Community Councillors were members of the Council at the time of the events detailed in the Audit Wales report: Mr Glyn Smith; Mr Robert Phillips; and Mr Bernard Wall. The Council would not presume to answer on behalf of individual councillors. If a member of the public ever wishes to ask a question of, or make a point to, any individual councillor, you will find their contact details on the Council website.

Ms Sarah Jones (Six Bells)
Will there be a detailed police report/investigation on behalf of residents?

The report by Audit Wales published earlier this month states that, in 2015, Audit Wales "... considered it necessary to bring some matters to the attention of officers of Gwent Police to enable them to consider whether there was evidence of criminality. Gwent Police carried out its own lengthy investigation into these matters and, having sought advice, concluded that it would not be in the public interest to seek to pursue a prosecution."

Is there a report available or further reasons given as to why a prosecution would not be in the public interest?

It was Audit Wales that brought matters to the attention of Gwent Police, and - following a lengthy investigation - Gwent Police that then informed Audit Wales that they would not seek to pursue a prosecution. Questions regarding the police investigation would need to be addressed to those two organisations.

Mrs Julie Holt (Abertillery)
In which newspaper was the notice of this meeting advertised and why was the deadline for the submission of public questions set so far in advance of the meeting?

The Public Notice was published in the Gwent Gazette, dated 28 October 2021 but published on 26 October 2021.
The deadline for written questions to be answered within the meeting was set to conform with the Council's Public Questions Policy, which forms part of the Council's Standing Orders. These are based on model policies and standing orders used by Parish, Town and Community Councils throughout the UK and dictate that questions must be delivered "in writing...no later than midday, five clear working days before the date of the meeting." The

Council's Public Questions Policy gives the Chair the option to defer answering a question submitted after the deadline which requires such a complex answer or excessive work that it would be unreasonable to expect the Council to have formulated a response by the time of the meeting. We have answered - and will continue to answer - questions from members of the public submitted at any time about any Community Council business. Questions pertaining to the recent Audit Wales report that require straightforward information and questions that should be addressed to other respondents have received a prompt response. All other questions - regardless of when they were received – have been forwarded to the Chair. If he so decides, questions received after midday on Tuesday 26 October can be addressed within the meeting along with those received before the deadline.