



SPECIAL HOUSING AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
THURSDAY, 5TH DECEMBER 2019 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Ridgewell - Chair
Councillor Mrs C. Forehead - Vice-Chair

Councillors:

R.W. Gough, L. Harding, A.G. Higgs, G. Kirby, W. Williams, B. Zaplatynski

Cabinet Members:

Mrs L. Phipps (Homes and Places), S. Morgan (Economy, Infrastructure and Sustainability & Wellbeing of Future Generations Champion)

Together with:

M.S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director, Communities), S. Couzens (Chief Housing Officer), S. Harris (Interim Head of Business Improvement Services & Acting S151 Officer), R. Kyte (Head of Regeneration and Planning), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J. Bevan, D. Cushing, C. Elsbury, Ms P. Leonard, Mrs G.D. Oliver, B. Owen, Mrs D. Price and Mrs M.E. Sargent, together with Cabinet Member Mrs E. Stenner (Environment and Public Protection).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in Agenda Items 3 and 4 as a Council tenant. Details are minuted with the respective items.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

3. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2020/21

Councillor A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in this item as a Council tenant and

remained in the room during consideration of the report.

Consideration was given to the report, which had been presented to Cabinet on 13th November 2019, and sought the Scrutiny Committee's views on the draft budget proposals for the 2020/21 financial year as part of a period of consultation (18th November 2019 to 13th January 2020), prior to a final decision by full Council on 20th February 2020.

The report explained that the proposals are based on a range of assumptions in the absence of details of the Welsh Government (WG) Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement for 2020/21. The report also provided details of draft savings proposals, along with a proposed increase of 6.95% in council tax to enable the Authority to set a balanced budget for the 2020/21 financial year.

Members noted that the projected savings requirement for 2020/21 (which was originally £15.658m in February 2019) has since been reviewed based on updated information and a revised set of assumptions, which were set out in Appendix 1 of the report. This has resulted in an updated projected savings requirement of £8.485m for 2020/21. Details of the proposed savings totalling £8.485m were provided in Appendix 2 of the report, which consisted of service efficiencies (£1.195m), ways of delivering services differently (£1.328m), service reductions and cuts (£3.703m), an increase in income generation (£1.284m), and miscellaneous finance savings (£975k). Also included at Appendix 3 of the report was the updated Medium Term Financial Plan for 2020/21 to 2024/25.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the proposals in detail and expressed concerns regarding their involvement and influence across the decision-making process, stating in particular that they had limited choice available to them in regards to the savings proposals. They suggested that it would perhaps be more beneficial for them to be presented with a longer list of savings and be able to have the opportunity to select their preferred savings options, rather than simply being asked for their views on a list of proposals put before them.

In response, it was emphasised to the Committee that their views were being sought as part of the consultation process, and that the final decision will be made by full Council in February 2020. Members were advised that the Council is no longer in an "and/or" position in respect of savings and that a number of difficult decisions will have to be made in relation to service cuts and reductions. The Committee were advised that prior to the shortlist of proposals being presented to Cabinet, all budgets across the Authority had been thoroughly examined on a line by line basis in order to identify potential areas of savings. A Member stated that the Committee should be able to have this same opportunity to look at budgets in-depth, and it was explained that this is a time-consuming process that is extremely complex in nature, particularly given that there are over 800 services across the Authority.

The Committee were reminded of the Members Seminar held the previous week to address queries in respect of individual proposals and were advised that the list was originally much longer than what is being presented to Members. It was explained that the final set of proposals will depend on the outcome of the public consultation and the level of funding provided in the Local Government Financial Settlement. It is hoped that Welsh Government will be in a position from next year to begin announcing settlement levels further in advance, which will allow the Council to plan their budgets over a longer period of time. Officers also highlighted the ethos of the Council's new *Team Caerphilly- Better Together* Transformation Strategy which will examine how services are prioritised, how they can become more business efficient, explore opportunities for greater customer focus and digital delivery, and consider alternative delivery models and seek out commercial

opportunities.

Having fully considered the report and expressed their views as part of the consultation process, the Scrutiny Committee noted the details of the draft budget proposals for 2020/21.

4. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2020/21 – HOUSING AND REGENERATION

Councillor A.G. Higgs declared a personal interest in this item as a Council tenant and remained in the room during consideration of the report.

Mark S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director – Communities) presented an overview of the draft savings proposals across the Regeneration and Planning Division of the Communities Directorate and the Housing Division of the Directorate of Social Services and Housing. The views of the Scrutiny Committee were sought on the contents of the report.

Members were referred to the list of draft savings proposals for the two service divisions under the remit of the Scrutiny Committee, which totalled £366k and were set out at Appendix 1 of the report. The proposals comprised of service efficiencies (£163k), service reductions and cuts (£138k), and an increase in income generation (£65k), and were supported by a set of MTFP savings templates which were included at Appendix 2 of the report.

Members were advised that the draft recurring savings of £366k represented 9.48% of the total budget for these two service divisions. The Scrutiny Committee were also asked to note the enormity of the savings achieved over the period 2014/15 to 2019/20, particularly in respect of the Regeneration and Planning service division, where £2.564m of savings have been made since 2014/15. It was explained that this equated to a staggering 71.4% of the budget for the 2014/15 financial year.

The Scrutiny Committee acknowledged the significance of the savings that have been made to date and recognised the work of Officers in continuing to deliver services despite the reductions made across service areas. Reference was made to the classification of impact listed against each of the proposals and it was explained that this relates to the assessed level of impact that the proposal will have on the public.

Questions were invited on the contents of the report, with the relevant Heads of Service in attendance to respond to queries on the savings proposals for their particular service areas. Discussion took place regarding the following savings proposals.

C07 – Reduction in the revenue budget for the Community Enterprise Fund (£50k)

Members referred to this item in association with the proposed reduction in the voluntary sector budget as detailed in the proposals to Cabinet at Agenda Item 3. They expressed concerns that these proposals were diminishing the perceived worth of the voluntary sector, and were also concerned that the cuts would have a detrimental impact on the level of officer support available to the voluntary sector. Reference was made to the decrease in the income generated through GAVO as a result of cuts in funding, and the loss of support staff working with the voluntary sector that had arisen through previous budget reductions. There were also concerns that there could be duplication of Officer work as a result of funding reconfiguration and that overall the proposals placed a lessening value on the role of the voluntary sector across the Authority.

In response, Officers confirmed that similar views had been expressed at the meeting of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee held earlier in the week and that these concerns would be relayed to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee at the meeting being held on 11th December 2019 to consider the savings proposals that are under their remit (including proposed cuts to voluntary sector funding). It was also explained that the views of Members would be captured in the minutes and presented to Cabinet as part of the outcome of the consultation process when the final set of savings proposals are considered in February 2020.

Officers also confirmed that applications for the Community Enterprise Fund (CEF) are now being accepted and is open to the voluntary sector, although the process and criteria differs slightly from the previous regeneration grants which were amalgamated into the CEF. Further details of the application process and criteria are available through the Council's website. Officers added that the work being carried out by the Council in relation to the voluntary sector will continue to complement the work of GAVO.

C06 – Housing – Withdrawal of General Fund Housing contribution to Community Environmental Warden Service (£45k)

Clarification was sought on the impact of this proposal and Officers explained that this is difficult to assess at this moment in time as the post is currently vacant. Moving forward, the service will be reconfigured to provide consistency across estates and will place a focus on safety checks for individual tenant properties, rather than having responsibility for the visual amenity of specific estates.

A Member expressed concerns that this proposal could lead to the escalation of fly-tipping incidents within their ward. Officers gave assurances that if the culprit can be identified, then enforcement action will be taken against them, and also that engagement will be carried out with tenants in order to mitigate such problems. The Member expressed the need for a swift response to reports of fly-tipping in order to prevent the further accumulation of waste, and also expressed concerns regarding the blight on the landscape and subsequent public perception of the estates within their ward. Officers confirmed that they would take these concerns on board, but expressed the need for there to be a consistent approach to fly-tipping management across all estates within the county borough.

A Member asked if there is funding available to tackle fly-tipping on estates through the WHQS Environmental Programme and it was confirmed that this has been allocated to the engagement events to be carried out with tenants.

In response to a query on covert camera use to tackle fly-tipping, it was confirmed that this is an option available to the Council. However, the Committee were advised there are already 6 civic amenity sites across the county borough, which exceeds the population ratio recommended by WRAP, and were reminded that there will always be individuals who choose to fly-tip their waste, irrespective of the choices available to them. Officers added that there is no correlation between the availability of civic amenity sites and level of fly-tipping. A Member also asked if the same was true in regards to the proposed increase for bulky collection charges. Officers explained that this would be a question for the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee but again, there would be no correlation between the two factors.

D01-D07 - #TEAMCAERPHILLY - Better Together - Fees and Charges (£65k)

Clarification was sought on the proposed increases in fees and charges linked to the *#TeamCaerphilly* strategy. Officers explained that this new Transformation Strategy places an emphasis on a more commercial approach for the Authority, profit for purpose and reinvestment in services. The Council's Commercial Strategy is currently being drafted, which will explore all opportunities and it was noted that the three Transformation Manager posts have recently be appointed, which are fixed-term for two years, and their progress will be the subject of regular reports to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

Members were also advised that the Council already generates income through its work on behalf of other authorities, an example of which includes the role Sustainable Drainage Approval Body for both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Councils.

A query was received regarding income generation for tourism venues and it was explained that these will be the focus of a service review report to the Transformation Board in due course. The Board is also examining income across the Council's industrial and office portfolio to identify potential opportunities for income generation.

A Member referenced targets set for income generation and previously reported to the Scrutiny Committee, and asked if it would be possible to receive these reports on a half-yearly basis. It was confirmed that this detail is included in the Budget Monitoring Reports presented to the Scrutiny Committee at regular intervals and that work is being carried out to set realistic income targets for each service area.

Having fully considered the report and expressed their views as part of the consultation process, the Scrutiny Committee noted the details of the draft budget proposals for 2020/21. In closing, they acknowledged the pressures and difficulties faced by the Authority in drawing up a shortlist of savings proposals, particularly in view of the high percentage of savings made over the past few years, but reiterated their view that they would like to be part of the decision making process in this regard.

Members thanked the Officers in attendance for their presentations and for responding to the queries raised during the course of the meeting.

The meeting closed at 6.17 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 28th January 2020, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR