

REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON THURSDAY, 12TH DECEMBER 2013 AT 5.00 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor D.T. Davies - Chairman

Councillors:

Mrs A. Blackman, J. Bevan, R.T. Davies, N. Dix, C. Elsbury, R.W. Gough, S. Kent, M.J. Prew, Mrs D. Price and Mrs E. Stenner.

Cabinet Members:

K. James (Regeneration, Planning and Sustainable Development), D.V. Poole (Community and Leisure Services) and T.J. Williams (Highways, Transportation and Engineering).

Together with:

S. Aspinall (Acting Deputy Chief Executive), P. Elliott (Head of Regeneration and Planning), R. Hartshorn (Head of Public Protection), T. Shaw (Head of Engineering Services), M.S. Williams (Head of Community and Leisure Services), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Research Officer) and R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer).

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Mrs E.M. Aldworth, C.J. Cuss, Ms E. Forehead, A.G. Higgs and Ms J.G. Jones.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made at the start of the meeting. During the course of the meeting, Councillors J. Bevan, D.T. Davies and C. Elsbury declared an interest in an item under discussion. Details are minuted with the respective item.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following.

3. PROVISIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT SETTLEMENT 2014/15 – SAVINGS PROPOSALS

Sandra Aspinall, Acting Deputy Chief Executive, introduced the report to Members, which gave an overview of the savings requirements for the period 2014/15 to 2016/17 along with a range of proposed savings and efficiencies for Members' consideration and comment. The proposals detailed related specifically to a number of Authority-wide issues and the Directorate savings for 2014/15. Members were reminded that the report showed a projected three year savings requirement of £28.13m for the whole Authority.

An amended copy of the long list of proposed savings and efficiencies included in the report was tabled to Members at the Scrutiny meeting, which Mrs Aspinall explained was indicative of the current fluid situation of the proposals.

Members were advised that only the proposed savings for 2014/15 would be presented at that meeting, in order to focus the Members' views and suggestions. This would ensure the setting of a balanced budget for 2014/15 and ensure that a range of indicative savings of proposals were prioritised for further work to address financial shortfalls in future years. All Members were invited to give their views following the presentation of the proposals.

Pauline Elliott, Head of Regeneration and Planning, presented suggested savings for her Service Area, and outlined potential savings for 2014/15.

Suggested savings in relation to vacancy management and budget realignment were outlined, including the reduction of several posts across the Service Area, reduction of services such as training and marketing to Business Enterprise Support, reducing archiving and training within Countryside and Planning Services, and a restructure within Blackwood Miners' Institute. These suggested savings totalled £323,000, and Members were advised this amounted to half of the proposed savings for the Service Area for 2014/15.

Opportunities to increase income and possible operating efficiencies were outlined. These incorporated the streamlining of the Authority's industrial properties, increased income from visitor centres, Llancaiach Fawr and Blackwood Miners' Institute, and an increase in land charges. These suggested savings totalled £160,000.

Proposals to introduce new fees and charges were outlined. These included introducing a charge for pre-planning advice (already utilised by a number of Authorities), charges for car parking at country parks, and charges for invasive species monitoring and Local Development Plan monitoring. These suggested savings totalled £137,000.

Other savings were also suggested via the reduction of community regeneration projects and the reduction of the enhanced maintenance budget. These suggested savings totalled £95,000.

The overall suggested savings for the Regeneration and Planning Service Area for 2014/15 was £715,000. Further proposals for savings in 2015/16 and 2016/17 were highlighted, with possible service restructuring and the reduction or closing of some facilities, which could result in some possible redundancies. Service reviews would also be carried out in line with benchmarking data.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Service for her presentation and invited Members to comment on the proposed savings.

Members discussed the suggested savings in relation to vacancy management and clarified a number of items within the presentation with the Head of Service. Members raised concerns that the reduction in posts could impact on staff morale and queried the need for a review of working practices. The Head of Service clarified that many of these reductions would occur through natural wastage and that a restructure of the Service Area would lead to joined-up teams and shared working practices, with services to the public maintained throughout.

Members also referenced the suggested savings via increased income and operating efficiencies and discussed plans for the Authority's industrial property portfolio and the profitability of the Authority's various tourist facilities.

Members discussed the suggested savings in relation to the implementation of new fees and charges. It was queried whether the income that could be produced from introducing a charge for pre-planning advice was negligible when compared to the amount of work required, and it was clarified that this was dependant on the type of advice provided and that it was a very popular service in other parts of the country. It was explained that the income figure was a conservative estimate and could potentially be higher than the figure provided.

Members queried the suggested introduction of a charge for car parking at country parks. The estimated income was £85,000 and Members sought clarification as to whether this was the resulting profit following the installation of pay and display machines and what financial year this income could be applied to. Members queried the capital investment involved in the proposal and determined that further specific information was required in relation to this suggested saving.

Members also discussed the other suggested savings in the presentation, particularly the reduction of the enhanced maintenance budget. The suggested savings target was 50% and Members determined that further information was required in relation to how this suggested saving would be achieved.

Mark S. Williams, Head of Community and Leisure Services, presented a list of suggested savings for 2014/15 for each section of his Service Area, and Members were invited to comment following the presentation of suggested savings for each section.

The first element of suggested savings detailed a number of efficiencies relating to Parks and Bereavement Services, including the deletion of one post upon retirement, an increasing of income, and reductions and frequency amendments to some services. These suggested savings totalled £364,700.

At this point in the meeting, Councillor D.T. Davies declared an interest in the proposal suggesting the ceasing of management grants to Bowls Clubs and splash pools within the Authority, as he is a member of Bargoed Bowls Club.

Members queried if residents would be affected by the removal of the grant to Bowls Clubs and the Head of Service confirmed that these grants were historic and not based on a logical allocation system. Members also discussed the maintenance of splash pools within the Authority. Following discussion regarding these grants, Members requested that further information be provided in relation to this particular savings proposal.

Discussion ensued in relation to grass cutting, the closure of two cricket squares, the deletion of the January cutting of highway hedges and embankments, and the phased removal of flowerbeds. Members queried the frequency of hedge and embankment cuts and it was confirmed that there was no cut at certain times of the year due to regulations regarding the nesting process of various wildlife.

Members queried the suggestion to remove the enhanced weekend park cleansing service, and raised concerns that this could potentially lead to broken glass left over the weekend, which could pose a danger to the public. Members queried whether the local community could be engaged in a park cleansing program but it was ascertained that this would not be a sustainable option on a regular basis. Members therefore requested further information in relation to reviewing the weekend park cleansing service.

The next element of suggested savings related to the Waste Strategy and Operations section and suggested an increase in some charges and the introduction of new charges, the

reconfiguration of working practices, vacancy management and service reduction. Members' attention was particularly directed to the suggested closure of some or all of the public conveniences in the Authority, a ban on vans and trailers disposing of waste at civic amenity sites due to increasing costs, charges for garden waste collections, and the closure of the Rhymney Civic Amenity site. These suggested savings totalled between £926,000 and £1.021 million, dependant on the level of proposals introduced.

Detailed discussion ensued regarding several of these proposals. Members discussed the suggested saving regarding public conveniences and requested further information regarding this proposal.

Members were concerned that a van and trailer ban at amenity sites would lead to an increase in illegal tipping and queried how this restriction would be monitored at civic amenity sites. Members queried the possibility of introducing a small charge for vans and trailers as an alternative measure and requested more specific information relating to this proposal.

Members discussed the proposed saving in relation to the introduction of charges for garden waste collection services, and requested further information in relation to this. Members discussed the suggested proposal to charge for all replacement and new issue waste containers and sought clarification regarding the current procedure for issuing bins. Members raised a number of concerns and requested further information regarding this suggested saving. Members also requested further information in relation to the proposal to introduce double shift working for mechanical sweepers.

The next element of suggested savings related to Sport and Leisure Services and suggested management restructuring (which had already been agreed by Members), the introduction of new pricing structures, increasing energy efficiency in leisure centres, centralising the Admin section, and closing the café in Caerphilly Leisure Centre. These suggested savings totalled £358,000.

Members discussed a number of the proposals, and it was confirmed that the proposed Admin restructure would probably lead to the reduction of one post. Members queried whether alternative provisions could be made in order to keep the café in Caerphilly Leisure Centre open. The Head of Service explained that it was now the only facility of this type in any of the leisure centres and that it would be more beneficial to close the café and utilise the extra space for increased leisure facilities. This would concentrate efforts on the Authority's aim of encouraging more people to participate in regular exercise activities.

The final part of the suggested savings related to Building Cleaning Services and it was proposed that a Direct Service Organisation (DSO) contract efficiency be introduced, which would involve the section starting the financial year with a negative budget and then generating monies throughout the year in order to move to a positive balance. These suggested savings totalled £50,000.

The overall suggested saving for the Community and Leisure Services area was between £1.699 million and £1.794 million. Further proposals for savings in 2015/16 and 2016/17 were highlighted, with further reduction of services and the possible closure of additional civic amenity sites and leisure centres.

The Head of Service was thanked for his thorough presentation and the Chairman confirmed that clarification and feedback on a number of the savings proposals would be required for a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

Terry Shaw, Head of Engineering Services, then presented a list of suggested savings for 2014/15 for each section of his Service Area.

The first element of suggested savings detailed a number of efficiencies relating to the Highway Operations Group. The suggested savings included cuts to the work programme

involving structures and retaining walls, reductions to the consultancy structure service level agreement, ceasing of the special works programme, the removal of funding support for Christmas festive lighting to towns and villages, and budget realignment in relation to private finance initiatives. These suggested savings totalled £270,000.

Discussion ensued regarding the proposal to cease local authority support to Christmas lighting in towns and villages. At this point, Councillor C. Elsbury declared an interest in this proposal as he advises a company that could potentially pick up the contract for festive lighting. Councillor J. Bevan also declared an interest due to his involvement in a community council that receives festive lighting funding from the Authority.

Members also queried the proposal regarding cuts to the works programme involving structures and retaining walls, and queried whether this cut would end up costing the Authority more money. The Head of Service confirmed the level of cuts being considered was only around 10% at the moment and that each case would be considered on its own merits.

The next element of suggested savings related to the Transportation Engineering Group and proposed the review of cleansing and repair operations to the Authority's bus shelters and stations. A suggested saving via the review of off-street parking charges had already been completed, and there were also proposals to review school crossing patrols and increase fares for the Connect2 Flexible Transport Service. These suggested savings totalled £101,100.

Members discussed the current arrangements in relations to the cleansing of bus stations and the impact of the suggested savings on the cleansing programme. Members also queried the review of school crossing patrols and it was confirmed that crossing points would be reviewed as the guards retired.

The final element of suggested savings related to the Engineering Projects Group (EPG) and addressed a review of the EPG contributions generated through income. These suggested savings totalled £40,000 and Members queried the funding arrangements in relation to the EPG.

The overall suggested saving for Engineering Services was £411,100. Further proposals for savings in 2015/16 and 2016/17 were highlighted, with further reductions and a review of services proposed within the Highway Operations Group and Transportation Engineering Group.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Service for his presentation.

Rob Hartshorn, Head of Public Protection, made the final presentation of the evening to Members and provided a list of suggested savings for 2014/15 for each section of his Service Area.

The first element of suggested savings related to proposed savings in the Environmental Health, Community Safety, Licensing and Registration sections. The proposals included increased pest control income, the introduction of a fee for household rat treatments, the ceasing of crucial crew, reduction of community safety vehicles, and an increase in licensing and registration fees. These suggested savings totalled £74,000.

Members queried the proposed introduction of a fee for household rat treatments and requested further information in relation to this suggested saving. Members also queried the proposed increase in licensing fees and requested further information in relation to this.

The next element of suggested savings related to proposed savings in the Catering section and proposed an annual increase in the price of school meals, staff restaurant prices and catering function charges. These suggested savings totalled £43,800. Members clarified the current prices and the impact of a price increase on current tariffs.

The overall suggested saving for the Public Protection area was £117,800. Further proposals for savings in 2015/16 and 2016/17 were highlighted, with the possibility of further fee increases across Public Protection, the deletion of trainee posts and the potential for flexible productivity working, and the reduction or withdrawal of some services following review.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Service for his presentation.

Members fully considered the reports, accompanying list of efficiencies and presentations from the Heads of Service and identified a number of proposals requiring further specific information from the Heads of Service. It was agreed that Members would reconvene at a special Scrutiny meeting in January 2014 for further consideration of the proposed savings and efficiencies.

The meeting closed at 18.56 pm.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 20th January 2014, they were signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN