



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON TUESDAY, 25TH JANUARY 2011 AT 5.15 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Taylor - Chairman

Councillors:

L. Binding, J.B. Criddle, D.T. Davies, M.A. Derrett, L. Hughes, Mrs V. Jenkins, G. Jones, D.V. Poole, D. Rees, K.V. Reynolds, A.S. Williams

Cabinet Members: Councillors C.P. Mann (Corporate Finance, Procurement and Sustainability) and A.J. Pritchard (Human Resources, Legal, Policy and Governance)

Together with:

N. Barnett (Deputy Chief Executive), P.S. Evans (Head of Information, Communications and Technology Services), G. Hardacre (Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development), D. Perkins (Head of Legal and Governance), N. Scammell (Head of Corporate Finance), R. Hopkins (Principal Housing and Council Tax Benefit Officer), D.A. Thomas (Senior Policy Officer, Equalities and Welsh Language), D. Titley (Customer Service Manager), J. Jones (Democratic Services Manager), R. Thomas (Committee Services Officer)

Also in attendance for agenda item 4(4), Draft Budget Proposals
1 April 2011/2014 for Consultation:

Councillors Mrs A. Collins, J.A. Pritchard, L. Whittle, T.J. Williams, J.M. Wilson and officers A. O'Sullivan (Chief Executive), S. Aspinal (Corporate Director, Education, LifeLong Learning and Leisure), A. Heaney (Corporate Director, Social Services)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H.A. Andrews, Mrs A. Blackman, D. Bolter, Mrs M.E. Sargent

CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Mrs M.A. Derrett to her first meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the beginning or during the meeting.

2. CABINET REPORTS

The following Cabinet report was brought forward for review.

3. Draft Budget Proposals 1 April 2011/2014 for Consultation (Cabinet – 11.01.11)

All Members of Council were invited to attend to discuss this agenda item. To facilitate this debate, the agenda item was brought forward for discussion and to accommodate all Members, the meeting commenced in the Council Chamber, Penallta House.

The report sought Cabinet approval to consult on the draft budget proposals, as detailed within the report. Cabinet, at its meeting of 11th January 2011, endorsed the report and gave the necessary approval. The report had been circulated to all Members as part of the consultation process at the end of 2010. Formal responses are required to the Deputy Chief Executive by no later than 4th February 2011.

Members discussed the report and officers responded to general questions. In particular Members commented on the level and timing of the consultation process and raised a concern regarding a number of streetlights that had been switched off. A Member also questioned paragraph 5.2.1 within the report and the significance of the four years quoted therein. Senior Officers stated that the draft budget had been produced in exceptional economic times, but the paragraph will be verified prior to the final document being released. No streetlights had been switched off, only operating times reduced to increase savings. Members were advised there may be a backlog in maintenance programmes as a result of the recent severe weather conditions but that this would be checked.

Congratulations were given in respect of the Social Services budget and savings obtained following the closure of Hawtin Park Offices and subsequent office relocation.

Officers confirmed WAG was yet to advise the Authority of values for a number of larger grants, however there had been no indication of drastic cuts or increases. Values were expected between the end of January and the end of March, and an amended report will be presented to inform Members accordingly. Confirmation was also given that proposals as to how to achieve savings will be reported in subsequent reports.

The Chairman thanked all Members and officers present and adjourned the meeting for five minutes to allow Members of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee to reconvene in the Rhymney Room for the remainder of the meeting.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the following minutes be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman:

- (1) Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 16th November 2010 (minute nos. 1 - 14, on page nos. 1 - 7);
- (2) Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee (Performance Management) held on 25th November 2010 (minute nos. 1 - 2, on page nos. 1 - 4);
- (3) Special Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 16th December 2010 (minute nos. 1 - 3, on page nos. 1 - 4).

RESOLVED that, subject to noting that Option 3 had not been rejected at previous meetings as indicated in the minute of the special meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 29th November 2010 (minute nos. 1 - 3, on page nos. 1 - 3), at minute reference 2, the minute be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

There were no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

6. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

Councillor A.J. Pritchard, Cabinet Member for Human Resources, Legal, Policy and Governance, advised the Scrutiny Committee that yesterday WLGA signed up to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on behalf of the 22 local authorities at the Workforce Partnership Council in order to protect local government jobs and services. CCBC is well placed to meet the guidelines within the MOU and information will be sent out to all Members to inform them of the agreement.

While the MoU is a voluntary agreement, both sides recognised the varying local circumstances in which it will be applied and recommended that the local parties undertook any negotiations in a spirit of partnership, transparency and co-operation.

The Trade Unions had raised concerns that compulsory redundancies are not avoided by the provisions within the MOU, however assurances were given to staff that these will be avoided as much as possible.

Gareth Hardacre, Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development, represents the 22 Local Authorities alongside his counterpart from Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.

Councillor C.P. Mann, Cabinet Member for Corporate Finance, Procurement and Sustainability advised the major precepting authorities had suggested the amounts in precepts issued to the Council following Coalition Government budget cuts. It was anticipated that the South Wales Fire Service was to ask for less money, while the Gwent Police Authority were anticipated to request an increase of somewhere in the region of 4%.

At a meeting with the Welsh Purchase Consortium yesterday, 16 local authorities worked together to reconsider Terms and Conditions to assist small businesses.

In closing, Councillor Mann advised that the PSBA scheme will soon be rolled out by IT. The network will connect the national infrastructure and will benefit Gwent local authorities and public bodies such as the Gwent Police Authority and Aneurin Bevan Health Service.

Members thanked the Cabinet Members for their presentations.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

7. CUSTOMER SERVICE FUNCTIONS

The report provided further information to Members following the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 5th October 2010. The report sought Members' views on officers' recommendations for the future of Customer Services across the county borough, in order to reduce Corporate Services budgets in line with the medium-term financial plan.

Extensive consultation identified an overwhelming majority wanted to retain a presence on the high street and the widening of choices available to the public to pay was warmly received. The report reflects these views and takes account of the Council's Regeneration Strategy for

Town Centres whilst balancing savings.

Officers highlighted the main proposals and sought Members' views, prior to a further report being brought before Cabinet.

Members welcomed the revised report and its recommendations.

A number of Members raised a concern regarding the proposal to roll out Paypoint facilities to Post Offices that were located close to CCBC cash offices and officers were asked to consider whether this roll out could exclude the Town Centres where cash offices exist. Members also asked whether the facility could be extended to include other public utilities such as water, gas and electricity. Officers confirmed these requests would be considered.

Members received confirmation that there was no transaction fee payable by customers using the Post Office, as the Authority was to pay a small charge per transaction. As uptake of this facility was anticipated to be small, revenue savings of £50k per annum was still anticipated. Should the payment facility be extended to all shops, concerns were raised that no savings would be achieved and visitor numbers at CCBC cash offices could be affected.

A Member asked if the payment facility will be extended to smaller libraries within the county borough. Officers confirmed that whilst discussions were taking place regarding services and information points within libraries, due to the security arrangements it was not practical to offer this facility at all libraries, at this time.

The Scrutiny Committee endorsed the recommendations contained in the report and recommended to Cabinet that:-

- (1) Paypoint facilities be introduced across the county borough via Post Offices only.
- (2) Bargoed, Caerphilly and Risca Town Centres develop Library Resource Centres to provide a comprehensive range of customer services.
- (3) Pontllanfraith House Cash office be closed and all of its business be transferred to Blackwood Customer Services.

8. CHANGES TO HOUSING BENEFIT FROM APRIL 2011 AND OCTOBER 2011 – OTHER LONGER TERM CHANGES

The report gave information to Members on the forthcoming changes to the Housing Benefit scheme and other longer term reforms to the Welfare System, and examined the likely impact on benefit claimants.

In the emergency budget in June 2010 and subsequent spending review, the Government announced significant changes to the Welfare System, including the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Schemes. The Government has made it clear that the overall cost of housing and council tax benefit (H&CTB) needs to be controlled and a package of measures to achieve this will be introduced in stages, starting in 2011, but continuing in subsequent years.

Changes for 2011 mainly impact on the "privately rented sector" (PRS), with the impact on all other tenants being less severe. Officers highlighted the changes and advised the Government acknowledged that this package of measures will adversely affect large numbers of claims and has gone some way to address the issue, including an overall budget increase for the Discretionary Housing Payments scheme (DHPs) from £10 million to £30 million in 2011/2012 and by a further £30 million to £60 million from 2012/2013. CCBC's DHP allocation for 2010/11 is £18,121, however at this point in time, the Authority's cash allocation for the addition funds is yet to be released.

Officers confirmed staff were well placed to implement the changes and were about to speak to stakeholders, landlords and the homeless to inform them of the implications of the reforms. Members advised of the need for additional promotion methods such as roadshows, mailshots and an article in Newsline. Members also requested that notification(s) be issued at the earliest possible time to allow people to budget accordingly.

Officers advised that some changes will be staggered, so existing claimants may not see an immediate change. New applications, with effect from April 2011, will be determined using the revised scheme.

Members discussed the report at length, and officers responded to questions regarding claimant numbers and the possible impact of the changes, despite additional measures introduced to assist. In noting the increased DHP scheme, Members also recognised this would be offset, and probably oversubscribed, by an increased number of claimants. Officers confirmed the need to develop a strict, robust criteria to receive DHPs. This will be progressed with Member involvement.

A Member commented on the social obligation to assist those people in need and asked what measures had been taken to ensure all parties were aware of the changes and associated implications. Officers reiterated they were meeting with landlords and homeless forums, talking to stakeholders and advised an explanation of the changes will be included within the annual year-end notifications. Additionally, officers were carrying out a review as to how to advertise the changes more widely. The DWP/HRMC are also carrying out their notifications.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report and welcomed the issue of an informative article in Newsline to inform readers of the reforms.

9. DRAFT SINGLE EQUALITY SCHEME

The report sought Members' endorsement for the draft Single Equality Scheme, the Council's first integrated Equality policy.

The Council currently complies with its statutory Equality duties in terms of Gender, Disability, Race and the Welsh Language and has had individual schemes in place to demonstrate its commitment. Many of these have, or are due to, come to an end and with the introduction of the Equality Act 2010. Furthermore WAG has recently completed a consultation on a Public Sector Equality Duty for Wales, which when introduced, will require public bodies to have a Single Equality Scheme in place.

The Single Equality Scheme will replace a number of existing council policies, namely the Race Equality Scheme, Gender Equality Scheme and Disability Equality Scheme and one operational document, namely the Linguistic Skills Strategy. The proposed Scheme does not commit the Council to any significant increase in provision over and above what was already in place, but brings everything being done already together in one place for the first time and ensures that the new requirements of the Equalities Act 2010 are covered.

Members praised the officer for level of consultation and hard work undertaken in producing the proposed scheme.

The Scrutiny Committee endorsed the recommendation contained in the report and recommended to Cabinet the Single Equality Scheme as a single replacement policy for the current schemes as noted above.

10. WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT (WAG) FUNDED LAND DRAINAGE SCHEMES AND TRECENYDD FOOTBRIDGE RESURFACING EMERGENCY EXPENDITURE

The report informed Members of an increase in contract final account figures of more than 10% in regard to WAG funded land drainage schemes and in relation to Trecenydd Footbridge.

Members noted the report and confirmed that subject to the removal of the recommendation to endorse the increase in final costs and emergency expenditure, this agenda item be treated as an information item.

11. WHOLE AUTHORITY BUDGET MONITORING 2010-2011

The report gave information on the position of the whole authority in respect of budget monitoring for 2010-2011.

Following a number of achieved savings, the total projected savings/underspends for the Authority for 2010/2011 is estimated to be £6.2m. Significant expenditure and income trends were highlighted, including the use of a one off surplus for 21st Century Schools and the difficulty in predicting DLO/DSO trading accounts.

A Member queried the £48k under spend in cemeteries following the decision by Cabinet on 28th October 2008 to increase bereavement fees by a maximum of 10% plus inflation, rather than the Bereavement Services Task and Finish Group's initial recommendation of an increase by 18.5% plus inflation per annum over the next 5 years. Officers confirmed a range of options had been presented to Cabinet. Further information in relation to this would be given to the Member.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the report and requested Directors and Heads of Service continue to review expenditure and income trends, in order to ensure annual budgets are achieved.

12. REQUESTS FOR AN ITEM TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

There were no requests for any reports to be prepared for consideration at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

13. INFORMATION ITEMS

The following reports were received and noted:

- (1) Budget Monitoring 2010/2011 - Corporate Services and Miscellaneous Finance;
- (2) Budget Monitoring 2010/2011 - Performance and Policy;
- (3) Refurbishment of Traditional Properties at St Cattwg's Avenue, Phase 1, Gellihaer;
- (4) Minutes of the Community Council Liaison Steering Group held on 17th November 2010;
- (5) Minutes of the Corporate Health and Safety Committee held on 22nd November 2010;
- (6) Minutes of the Caerphilly Local Service Board held on 23rd November 2010;
- (7) Minutes of the Caerphilly Local Service Board held on 7th December 2010.

The meeting closed at 7.10 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 8th March 2010, they were signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN