



ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON TUESDAY, 10TH DECEMBER 2019 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor A. Hussey - Vice Chair - Presiding

Councillors:

M.A. Adams, A. Collis, A. Gair, Ms J. Gale, S. Kent, Mrs A. Leonard, J. Roberts, J. Scriven, G. Simmonds, T.J. Williams

Cabinet Members:

N. George (Neighbourhood Services), S. Morgan (Economy, Infrastructure, Sustainability and Wellbeing of Future Generations Champion), Mrs E. Stenner (Environment and Public Protection)

Together with:

M.S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director of Communities), S. Harris (Interim Head of Business Improvement Services & Acting S151 Officer), R. Hartshorn (Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services), M. Lloyd (Head of Infrastructure), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D.T. Davies (Chair), C. Elsbury, M. Evans, D.W.R. Preece and A. Whitcombe, together with Cabinet Member Mrs L. Phipps (Homes and Places).

In the absence of Councillor D.T. Davies, Councillor A. Hussey presided as Chair for the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Clarification was sought on whether or not those Members appointed as school governors were required to declare an interest in relation to Agenda Item 4 (Proposal C10 – Withdrawal of School Crossing Patrol sites). The Scrutiny Officer explained that as school governors are an LEA appointment, it would be a matter for each Member as to whether not they wished to declare on this basis but, if so, this would be a personal interest only and would not preclude them from remaining in the meeting during consideration of the item.

There were no declarations of interest subsequently received at this point or during the course of the meeting.

3. MINUTES – 29TH OCTOBER 2019

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee held on 29th October 2019 (minute nos. 1 - 8) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Mark Jacques (Scrutiny Officer) presented the report, which outlined details of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period December 2019 to March 2020, and included all reports that were identified at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 29th October 2019.

Members considered the forward work programme and agreed that two 6-monthly update reports in respect of Wellbeing Objectives be placed on the Forward Work Programme for 11th February 2020 as information items, namely WBO4 (Modern Integrated Transport) and WBO5 (Create a Healthy Place).

Subject to the foregoing report additions, it was unanimously agreed that the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme be published on the Council's website.

Following consideration of the item, a Member referred to Objective 1 of the Corporate Plan 2018-2023 (Improve education opportunities for all) as set out in the Officer's covering report for the FWP, and queried how this could be achieved in view of the proposed 2% reduction in the budgets that are delegated to schools. It was confirmed that this question would be addressed during consideration of Agenda item 3 (Draft Budget Proposals 2020/21).

6. CABINET REPORTS

It was noted that the Cabinet report listed on the agenda had not been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

7. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2020/21

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.

Steve Harris (Interim Head of Business Improvement Services & Acting S151 Officer) gave an overview of the report to put the ongoing challenging financial position into context. Members were reminded that the details of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement are normally announced by Welsh Government (WG) in early October each year. However, due to a combination of the continuing uncertainty around Brexit, the delay in undertaking the UK Government spending review, and the forthcoming General Election, the announcement of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement for 2020/21 had been delayed. At the time of writing the Draft Budget Proposals report, it had been anticipated that the Provisional Settlement would be announced on the 26th November 2019. However, it has since been confirmed by WG that details of the Provisional Settlement will not now be released until 16th December 2019.

It was noted that to ensure that sufficient time is allocated to consult on the Council's draft budget proposals for 2020/21, Cabinet has endorsed the draft budget and associated savings proposals in advance of the announcement of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement.

Members were advised that the draft budget proposals use a start point based on the Medium-Term Financial Plan presented to Council on 21st February 2019, which showed a projected 2020/21 savings requirement of £15.658m based on information available at that time. The projected position for 2020/21 has since been reviewed based on updated information and a revised set of assumptions. This has resulted in an updated projected savings requirement of £8.485m, which is a reduction of £7.173m on the position reported in February 2019, and further details were set out at Appendix 1 of the report.

The main reasons for this significant reduction in the savings requirement are an assumed cash flat position in respect of the core funding received from WG, an assumption that cost pressures in respect of Teachers Pensions will be fully funded, and a proposed increase in Council Tax of 6.95%.

Details of the proposed savings totalling £8.845m were provided in Appendix 2 of the Cabinet report. It was explained that the Council have attempted to limit the impact on frontline services wherever possible by focussing on delivering efficiencies and through doing things differently. However, it will not be possible to achieve a balanced budget without having to make some difficult decisions, and regrettably the draft budget proposals do include proposed service reductions and cuts totalling £3.708m.

The Scrutiny Committee were also advised that in terms of the financial outlook for future years the Medium-Term Financial Plan presented to Council in February 2019 showed a potential savings requirement of £44m for the four-year period 2020/21 to 2023/24. Considerable uncertainty surrounds the funding position moving forward. The UK Government has completed a spending review for 2020/21 only at this stage, so there is no indication of likely funding levels in the medium to long-term. With this in mind the MTFP has been updated based on current information and a revised set of assumptions, which has resulted in an anticipated savings requirement of £27m for the four-year period 2021/22 to 2024/25. Further details were set out in Appendix 3 of the Cabinet report.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the proposals and discussed the delay to the WG Provisional Settlement announcement and the subsequent impact on the Council's financial outlook. It was emphasised to Members that the Council will be better placed to share their position following the announcement of the Provisional Settlement on 16th December 2019.

A Member referred to the increase in the level of funding that has been allocated from Westminster to Welsh Government for the 2020/21 financial year. He queried why the Council are assuming a cash flat position for the Financial Settlement in light of this increase.

Officers explained that an increase has been assumed in relation to the funding of teachers pensions, but in the absence of any detail in relation to the Local Government Settlement, no further funding increases have been assumed at this point. The Council will not know details of the specific increase for Local Government until the announcement on the 16th December 2019. This will reflect agreed priorities at the Welsh Government level but these cannot be assumed in advance of the Settlement details being released.

Officers also responded to the earlier question posed regarding the impact of the proposed 2% reduction in the budgets for schools. It was emphasised that there is a need to make savings across the Authority which will inevitably impact on service delivery, and the Authority has done its level best to minimise the impact to schools. Members were advised that this particular proposal had been raised as a concern across the MTFP Scrutiny Committee meetings, and a recommendation had been made to Cabinet from the Education Scrutiny Committee to passport any additional funding in the Settlement directly to schools. Feedback on this proposal will be taken into consideration by Cabinet when considering the final list of budget savings for 2020/21. It was also explained that the Council is working with head teachers to plan for the potential reduction in their budgets.

During consideration of the item, Members also discussed directorate-specific proposal C10 (Withdrawal of School Crossing Patrol Sites). Details are minuted under Agenda Item Number 8.

A Member asked if they could be supplied with a list of non-statutory services across the Authority. Officers explained that the Council is currently compiling a service directory, which will be shared with Members once finalised, and will contain key details of each department, including if the service is statutory or discretionary.

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.

8. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2020/21 – ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Mark S. Williams (Interim Corporate Director – Communities) presented an overview of the draft savings proposals across the four service divisions of the Communities Directorate applicable to the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, namely Community and Leisure Services, Public Protection, Infrastructure Services and Property Services. 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 four service divisions under the remit of the Scrutiny Committee, which totalled £2.026m and were set out at Appendix 1 of the report. The proposals comprised of service efficiencies (£254k), changes to the way services are delivered (£309k), service reductions and cuts (£1.318m), and an increase in income generation (£145k), and were supported by a set of MTFP savings templates which were included at Appendix 2 of the report. Equalities Impact Assessments had also been completed where relevant and were included at Appendix 3 of the report.

Members were advised that the draft recurring savings of £2.026m represented 4.34% of the total budget for these four service divisions. The Scrutiny Committee were also asked to note the savings achieved over the period 2014/15 to 2019/20, where £16.564m of savings have been made across the four service areas since 2014/15, and equated to 32.2% of the budget for these service areas for the 2014/15 financial year.

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 area,

Discussion took place regarding the following savings proposals.

B09 – Merge Community Safety Wardens (CSWs) with the Environmental Health General Enforcement Team (£160k)

Members voiced their support for the work of the CSW team and sought clarification on the details of the proposal. Officers explained that there are currently 6 CSW posts, and of these, 3 posts are fixed-term to 31st March 2020, 2 posts are on permanent contracts, and the other permanent post is vacant and will not be re-filled unless this draft budget proposal is not approved. It is proposed that the two permanent CSW posts be merged into the Enforcement Team, due to the affinity between the two services and the similarities between the roles carried out. The CSW service would still be in existence, albeit as part of the Enforcement Team, and it was emphasised to Members that the CSW service is a discretionary service that is not provided by any other local authority in Wales.

A Member asked if the fixed-term CSWs would be deployed to other areas within the Authority once their contracts end and were advised that there is no duty for the Council to re-deploy those staff on fixed-term contracts. However, the postholders will be employed until 31st March 2020 as per their conditions of employment and in the meantime are entitled to apply for other opportunities within the Council.

C10 – Withdraw the School Crossing Patrol sites that no longer meet the national standards criteria (£158k)

The Scrutiny Committee discussed and revisited this proposal several times throughout the course of the meeting. A Member asked if any alternative crossing mechanisms could be put in place if the provision is withdrawn. Officers explained that any provision of crossing sites or alternatives are dependent on national guidance and assessments. Members were also reminded of the discretionary nature of the service and were advised that for a number of years, the Authority has gone over and above the criteria required in its provision of school crossing patrol sites.

Members expressed concerns that there could be a potential increase in pedestrian accidents if certain sites were to be withdrawn. Officers gave an overview of the criteria and assessment process for the service and explained that even though a site might be withdrawn if it no longer meets the national guidance, there could be potential for it to be reassessed and reinstated in the future. Clarification was sought on the process for initiating a reassessment and Officers explained that this would occur if there were significant changes to the circumstance's of the surrounding area, such as a new housing development or new highway network.

A Member asked if the Council were able to supply accident data for crossing sites, and Officers explained that any accidents would form part of the assessment undertaken against each individual site, although they were not aware of any accidents at these locations. However, they confirmed that they would provide further information to Members following the meeting in this regard. A Member also highlighted a site where traffic calming signage was needed following the withdrawal of a school crossing patrol. The Committee were asked to send any details of any locations requiring attention to the Head of Infrastructure following the meeting.

A Member asked if it would be possible to implement double yellow lines on kerbs in order to prevent pavement parking. Officers explained that WG are looking at this issue in conjunction with their review of 20mph zones, and that any changes will be implemented following the review. Members also discussed the issue of road safety and pavement parking around school sites. Another Member expressed the view that a blanket ban on

pavement parking would cause road congestion in narrow streets. Officers explained that the WG working group set up to look at this issue will take all factors into account before deciding if a blanket ban on pavement parking should be imposed.

C25 – Decommission all BT line rental cameras (£24k)

Clarification was sought on the proposal and whether or not any alternative measures would be put in place. Officers explained that this proposal was for the removal of the 26 CCTV cameras across the county borough utilising BT fibre connections, and that there were no plans to offer a replacement, given the low level of crime in the locality. It was explained that the other CCTV cameras across the borough utilise public sector broadband but there were technical reasons why these cameras could not be moved on to the same circuit.

Members expressed concern that the removal of cameras in particular locations would lead to the complete loss of CCTV coverage in those areas, and were of the view that this could lead to an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour. A Member referred to ASB issues in his ward and the number of requests by police for CCTV footage, and asked if some of the cameras had been installed through community grants, and if so, if it would be possible to view the paperwork agreements. Officers explained that they were not aware of any such funding through community groups but would make enquiries in this regard. However, Members were advised that any installation may not have included the cost of ongoing maintenance, such as replacement cameras and operation costs.

Officers acknowledged the strength of public feeling in regards to this proposal but reiterated to the Committee that CCTV is a discretionary function and that the Authority is already well-serviced with over 150 cameras across the borough. Members were also asked to note the details of the public impact analysis in relation to this proposal that was appended to the report. They were also advised that they could make a recommendation to Cabinet if they wished to vary the areas decommissioned, but that this would have an impact on the level of saving that would be achieved.

A Member stated that the presence of CCTV cameras in his ward have a positive impact on the driving behaviour of residents, and he expressed concerns that the removal of these cameras could lead to an increase in speeding incidents and road traffic accidents. Officers explained that these cameras are separate to speed cameras and are not used for traffic management purposes.

D08 – increase charges for bulky collections (from £16 to £25 for 1 to 3 items) (£25k)

In response to a Member's query, Officers explained that bulky collections are classed as larger items that cannot be disposed of in a household refuse bin. A Member also enquired as to the annual cost of fly-tipping clearance and Officers confirmed they would arrange to circulate this information to Members following the meeting.

B08 – Closure of Trehir Household Waste Recycling Centre (£15k)

Concerns were raised over the potential public impact of this proposal and for the potential for increased fly-tipping incidents. A Member expressed frustration at the lack of investment in the site over the years and the resulting remedial works now needed to the Bailey Bridge entrance of the site, and was of the view this proposal would be of detriment to residents in the surrounding area. The Member also queried the reasoning for the proposed investment in Penallta HWRC given the proposal to close the Trehir site instead of investing in this site. Officers explained that the proposal had arisen from the work of the Waste Review Working Group who had recognised the need for the Council to rationalise the network of HWRC sites in order to deliver realistic achievable outcomes. Members were advised that in

addition to the ongoing issues around Bailey Bridge, the rationale for the proposal has arisen because Trehir needs significant investment in its infrastructure which is in the region of £300k. Even if investment took place at Trehir, residents would still have the same service offer without any benefits, whereas the investment at Penallta would result in a larger site with a greatly enhanced service offer, including a proposed re-use shop.

The Scrutiny Committee were advised that fly-tipping will continue to happen regardless of the number of sites available, and that this cannot be viewed as an excuse for fly tipping. It was explained that the Council has a duty to provide places for residents to dispose of household waste, but are well in excess of the WRAP guidelines in regards to the provision available for its population.

A Member suggested that the Scrutiny Committee should be given the opportunity to consider closure options for all 6 of the Council's civic amenity sites, and Officers explained that the financial implications would be similar for each site. However, there is significant cost avoidance to be achieved from the closure of the Trehir site.

Concerns were expressed regarding the potential for an increased carbon footprint by people having to travel further to a civic amenity site and reference was made to the Council's recent declaration of a climate emergency and pledge to reduce its carbon footprint. It was explained that this commitment relates to climate change and carbon reduction work within the running of the local authority itself, and not through factors outside of the Council's control (such as car usage by its residents).

D09 – Review Pest Control Fees and Charges and introduce a charge for rat treatments (£20k)

Members enquired as to the feasibility of a lesser charge of £10 to mitigate the anticipated decline in the number of service requests. Officers explained that the proposed £20 charge is well below the market rate and, given a 50% concession is also already proposed for those in receipt of relevant benefits, this would exceed the admin costs associated with processing the charge.

Concerns were expressed that the introduction of a charge could lead to rat infestations across the Authority. Officers explained that in such circumstances, the Council has enforcement powers to ensure that the issue is rectified by the householder.

C11 – Blackwood to Ystrad Link – Withdrawal of Subsidy (£80k)

Members expressed concerns regarding the proposed withdrawal of the Blackwood to Ystrad Mynach Rail Link service and the impact this could have on commuters at peak travel periods in the morning and evening. Officers confirmed that they are currently in discussion with Transport for Wales and bus operators with regards to seeking suitable service alternatives. However, it was emphasised to Members that there is an alternative bus service in place (albeit less frequent) for commuters and that the Rail Link is a non-statutory service with a very high subsidy per passenger. In addition, this is the only dedicated Rail Link provision provided within the Authority. Members were also advised of alternative travel options available, such as the Park and Ride facility at Newbridge Train Station.

C23 – Reduction of 1 hour Caretaker support across all Community Centres (£18k)

A Member asked for her concerns to be noted regarding the potential impact of this proposal on community centres.

Following consideration of the report and in noting its contents, it was moved and seconded that subject to the comments of the Scrutiny Committee in respect of individual proposals being relayed to Cabinet and taken into account, the proposals in the report be accepted. By a show of hands (and in noting there were 4 against) this was agreed by the majority present.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that subject to the views of the Scrutiny Committee being taken into account in respect of individual savings proposals, the proposals as set out in the report be accepted.

The Presiding Chair closed the meeting at 7.05 p.m. and wished all in attendance a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 11th February 2020, they were signed by the Vice Chair.

VICE CHAIR