

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, on Tuesday, 28th January 2014 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) M E Davies – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

W J David
I Pearce
L G Walker

C Davies
R W Smith
(Mrs) J S Ward

S Lloyd
B Stephens

Officers:

Mr N Elliott – Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing

Mr A Gwynn – Service Director, Children's Services

Mr C Lee – Director of Financial Services

Mr C B Jones – Service Director, Legal & Democratic Services

Mrs A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

40. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from the County Borough Councillors A S Fox, (Mrs) S Jones, (Mrs) S Rees, (Mrs) A Roberts, (Mrs) J Rosser, D Weeks and D H Williams.

41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED to note that in accordance with the Code of Conduct, there were no declarations of personal interest relating to the agenda.

42. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 4th December 2013 be approved as a correct record subject to noting the typographical error at the top of page 4 which should read:

“A Member suggested that there a need to consider what the market could bear and felt that anything above 3-3.5% would place families under too much pressure.”

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, CORPORATE SERVICES

43. GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION – STAGE 2

The Director of Financial Services provided the Committee with a presentation which provided feedback on Stage 1 of the General Budget Consultation and

set out the process for Stage 2. He pointed out that this process was separate from the Phase 2 consultation which was currently underway in relation to service change proposals. He explained that a report had been presented to Cabinet on 21st January 2014 which provided feedback on the Stage 1 consultation and set out the Corporate Management Team proposals and as a result Cabinet had agreed to launch the Stage 2 consultation process and intended to meet sometime in mid February to review the outcome. He explained that for Stage 2 it was intended to engage more fully to include the Older People Forum as well as undertaking an on-line consultation. A copy of the consultation had also been sent to all members of Rhondda Cynon Taf's Citizen's Panel.

The Director of Financial Services reported on the final funding levels for 2014/15 but cautioned against placing too much reliance on the indicative figure given by the Welsh Government for 2015/16. He also highlighted the reduction in capital funding which would impact on the Council's ability to maintain assets. The key elements of the strategy were explained to Members, in particular the use of a Medium Term Financial Planning & Service Transformation Reserve to support the implementation of service cuts and changes. He explained that Phase 1 of the service changes should deliver savings of £7.6M across a full year. However, due to a number of factors, including the delay in implementing the changes to nursery provision there would be a funding gap for the first year totalling £5.2M for which it was proposed to use the Transformation Fund. This would leave an amount of £4.8M in the Fund.

Members were asked for their views in relation to the key issues and informed that their comments would be used to assist Cabinet in its deliberations before making their recommendations to Council.

RESOLVED that the views of the Community and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee be passed on to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in consideration of the Council's Budget Proposals for 2015-2016 as follows:

1. Is the uplift proposed reasonable for schools?

Before asking for Members' comments, the Director of Financial Services clarified that whilst there was no requirement for schools to contribute efficiency savings to close the funding gap, this did not mean that they should not strive to be more efficient.

A Member commented that he was glad to see the uplift in the Schools Budget and welcomed the Welsh Government's stance in this instance, pointing out that schools looked after our most important asset, our young people.

A Member raised concern that any savings made by a school through efficiency could potentially just add to their balance rather than be put to good use and suggested that some sort of guidance should be issued to schools.

The Director of Financial Services reported that the level of school balances was monitored both to assist those schools with lowering balances and also identify those with large balances. He added that it was possible to claw back funding in these cases if the schools had no commitment to utilise the money.

A Member pointed out that those schools with old buildings sometimes need to retain funding to support the upkeep.

A Member felt that it was important to remember that any additional support provided for schools meant that other service areas would suffer.

2. Is the efficiency expectation reasonable? Are there any specific areas / ideas / ways that efficiency actions could be delivered?

A Member pointed out that the bus shelters in her area appeared to be cleaned very regularly and questioned whether this was really necessary.

The Director of Financial Services agreed that this was an issue across a range of services – was the Authority delivering a ‘gold’ standard service whereas other authorities were delivering ‘silver or bronze’.

A Member voiced his concern that the continual emphasis on efficiency savings suggested that the Council must be inefficient. Given that the biggest portion of the Council’s costs lay in its staff how could efficiencies be made without cutting front line services. In his opinion the inefficient organisations were the Westminster and Welsh Governments.

The Director of Financial Services suggested that it could be argued that there would always be opportunities to be more efficient as a result of new technology or through procurement. He felt that in recent years there had been a more honest appraisal of savings and an acknowledgment that services would be affected.

A Member questioned whether efficiency was another cut on top of cuts.

A Member suggested that there should be a proper career path for social workers with recruitment of social work apprentices which would then avoid the costs of employing agency staff.

The Service Director Direct Services, Business and Housing pointed out that the Council was one of the best in Wales in relation to developing its own social workers. He explained that the issue would also be discussed at a later agenda item but pointed out that over the last 7 years the Council had increased its number of social workers by 35 and many of these had come through the Council’s development programme.

The Member added that he knew of several who had commented that they wished they had come into the profession earlier.

Another Member commented that the Council was one of the first in Wales to develop its own development programme in conjunction with the University of Glamorgan and the Service Director Children's Services added that the Council was one of the few who still did so.

A Member pointed out that whilst the better authorities trained and invested in their staff others often reap the benefit by enticing them away with higher salaries with the charities in his opinion often being the worst offenders in this respect. He added that it was important for the Authority to 'grow' its own social workers but at the same time it was important to ensure that they were retained.

3. What are your views on the use of the Medium Term Financial Planning & Service Transformation Reserve as transitional funding?

A Member commented that it was a good job that it existed.

The Chair asked what would happen if the fund was exhausted.

The Director of Financial Services explained that it was one-off funding and potentially that could happen. He explained that whilst the fund would plug the gap for 2014/15, if the predicted savings were not made then going into 2015/16 there would be a shortfall before addressing any new cutbacks.

A Member asked whether the absence of the fund would have led to a greater rise in Council Tax, perhaps 8%?

The Director of Financial Services reported that there would have been a need for more immediate service cuts as there would be a need to produce a balanced budget. He also commented that whilst the Welsh Government had not imposed a cap on Council Tax increases he suspected that the Welsh Government Minister would intervene if a rise of 8% was proposed.

4. What are your views on the proposed increase in Council Tax?

The Director of Financial Services reported that the proposed rise would mean a rise of 60p per week for those in Band A and £1 per week for those in Band B. He also explained that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme placed an additional cost on the Council, whereas an increase of 1% in Council Tax used to provide around £800k in revenue it now only provides £641k additional net income.

A Member asked if it would be possible to have a statistical breakdown in terms of the number of households that were required to pay their Council Tax in full, those eligible for partial reduction and those that qualified for 100% relief.

The Director of Financial Services reported that it would be possible to provide regular information in this respect, perhaps included in the quarterly performance reports.

A Member asked how Council Tax was collected with regard to Houses in Multiple Occupation to which the Director of Financial Service reported that he would obtain the details and report back to Members.

The Member also highlighted the increase in the Police precept of 5%.

5. Any other comments?

A Member felt it was important to acknowledge that the services within the remit of the Committee had taken a hit with regard to changes to service provision and it was concerning that those most vulnerable in society would be affected. He felt that it was important that the Committee should monitor the situation.

With regard to the budget projections a Member pointed out that it was important that the figure for Looked After Children was accurate.

The Director of Financial Services responded that in his opinion the figures used for the purpose of the financial modelling were reasonably accurate.

The Member asked if the trend was still upward and the Service Director, Children's Services confirmed that it was. He explained that whilst the figure had stabilised for a short period of time the figures were now rising and this was reflected across Wales.

The Director of Financial Services reminded Members that the risk had been regularly highlighted within the quarterly monitoring and exception reports and agreed that the risk remained.

A Member asked what the picture was across Wales with regard to Council Tax rises.

The Director of Financial Services reported that local authorities were required to set their level of Council Tax by the end of March therefore it was too early to say.

REPORTS OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

44. CSSIW ANNUAL COUNCIL REPORTING FRAMEWORK INSPECTION EVALUATION AND REVIEW 2012/13

The Committee was presented with the 2012/13 CSSIW Annual Evaluation report for Rhondda Cynon Taf and Members were informed the areas for improvement identified within the report are being addressed through existing business planning arrangements and progress would be included in the Director of Social Services Annual Report for 2013/14. To assist Members' understanding of the report, the Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing provided the Committee with an overview of the report based on the information presented by the CSSIW to Cabinet Members.

The Service Director drew Members' attention to the report's summary and highlighted the key messages from the CSSIW report.

The CSSIW report identified a number of areas of good practice and acknowledged the social care accolades which had been awarded to the Authority. The report also identified potential future risks which included an area of longstanding concern in relation to the allocation of qualified social workers to children on the Child Protection Register and children looked after compared to other councils in Wales.

In conclusion, the Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that overall it was felt that the report was a fair reflection of the position of the Council at the end of the last financial year ie the year ending 31st March 2013.

A Member raised his concern in relation to the issue of the allocation of qualified social workers to children on the Child Protection Register and those in the Looked After system and commented that he had sought reassurance in relation to this in the past.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that he would investigate how the performance indicators had been reported in the past but was aware that for some time performance had been below the 100% target and this was reflected in the quarterly performance exception reports.

A Member referred to page 14 of the agenda pack (page 2 of the CSSIW report), which commented that only 70% of looked after children were allocated to a social worker, which is much lower than any other council in Wales; and asked what the situation was in the other South East Wales authorities.

It was agreed that this information would be obtained.

The Member also referred to page 18 of the agenda pack, which referenced the high number of referrals in respect of children who were not allocated to a social worker for initial assessment.

The Service Director Children Services pointed to the very high numbers of children within the Council's Looked After system and explained that it was an area which had been investigated but that given the level of deprivation within the County Borough it was likely that both referral numbers and consequently the numbers within the looked after system would always be high. The Director reassured Members that whilst some Looked After Children were not allocated a qualified social worker they were allocated to an appropriately trained care worker.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that the situation was being managed in a number of ways. There was a robust risk assessment system in place alongside investment in training and development of staff. He had confidence in the risk assessment and pointed out that if the

service was in a position to recruit a large number of social workers to meet the increasing demand it would be difficult as there is a shortage of experienced social workers, especially in children's services.

The Member suggested that the workload must place pressure on staff and commented that the report pointed to tensions in relation to re-numeration.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing agreed that there were concerns amongst staff, which had been highlighted in the CSSIW evaluation and work was underway to explore how best to manage and support the workforce. As a result of the single salary point policy the Council had done well in attracting new social workers but it was becoming more difficult to retain the experienced social workers. The Service Director Children's Services reported that a meeting of senior officers, including those from Human Resources had taken place that day. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing concluded that across the year the service had continued to improve its performance but due to the ever increasing level of demand the service had been unable to demonstrate this through an improvement in the percentage based performance indicators. However, he wished to assure Members that there would be no lack of effort to try and improve the situation.

RESOLVED: to note the contents of the report.

45. CWM TAF SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD ANNUAL REPORT 2012/13

The Committee considered the first annual report of the Cwm Taf Safeguarding Children Board since the amalgamation of the former Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil Local Safeguarding Boards. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing provided an overview of what had been achieved during the first year of operation with particular emphasis on the commissioned work to develop a multi agency safeguarding hub (MASH).

Members welcomed that report and it was **RESOLVED** to note the contents of the report.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

46. FFRAMWAITH CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTNERSHIP – REPORTING MECHANISM FOR SCRUTINY

Members were asked to consider whether they wished the minutes of the Fframwaith Children & Young People's Partnership Board meetings to continue to be presented to both the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee and the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee or whether they wished the minutes to be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the Fframwaith Children & Young People's Partnership Board meetings should continue to be presented to the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee and the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee (subject to their agreement).

47. BEST WISHES

RESOLVED: that a letter be sent to Mr Ellis Williams, Group Director, Community & Children's Services following his recent illness offering the best wishes of the Committee.

(Mrs) M E Davies
Chairman

The meeting concluded at 6.18 pm.