

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, 27th January 2015 at 5.00 pm.

Present:

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

County Borough Councillors:

W J David	S Evans	(Mrs) S J Jones
(Mrs) S Rees	(Mrs) A Roberts	(Mrs) J Rosser
R W Smith	B Stephens	L G Walker
D Weeks		

Officers:

Mr G Isingrini – Group Director, Community & Children's Services
Mr R Gatis – Service Director, Adult Locality Services and Short Term Intervention
Mr A Gwynn – Service Director, Children's Services
Mr B Davies – Director of Financial Services
Mr C B Jones – Service Director, Legal & Democratic Services
Mr P Howells – Head of Community Housing Services
Ms C Emery – Housing Options, Homelessness & Supporting People Manager
Mrs A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

Cabinet Member in Attendance

County Borough Councillor G Hopkins – Cabinet Member for Children's Social Services & Equalities

37. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors C Davies, A S Fox, S Lloyd, I Pearce, (Mrs) J S Ward and D H Williams.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in relation to the agenda.

39 MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Community and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee held on 15th December 2014.

With reference to page 5 of the minutes (Minute 34), a Member referred to the question of delivering services on a locality based module. The Member explained that he was aware that the staff at the current Cynon office would be

moving to Ty Trevithick and he had concerns for the future delivery of social services in the Cynon Valley.

The Group Director for Community & Children's Services explained that he did not believe that having an office in every location is necessary to access services. He reported that he did not believe that the current office was fit for purpose or suitable for staff and also pointed out that the work with clients was often carried out in their own homes. He pointed out that Ty Trevithick was a suitable office base and that some services were already working from there. The Service Director, Children's Services added that a Children's team was based there.

A Member asked that once the planning had been completed that the Scrutiny Committee be given the opportunity to consider the map of the proposed new delivery model of services and the rationale behind it prior to any final decision being taken by Cabinet.

The Group Director added that one of the Council's most successful services was the 'Single Point of Access' adult service.

RESOLVED: that the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee be given the opportunity to consider the proposed new locality arrangements prior to implementation.

40. **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 of the consultation which he explained would conclude on 4th February 2015 with the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Director of Financial Services reported on the final funding levels for 2015/16 and explained that there was no indication as to the funding levels for 2016/17. He also highlighted the reduction in capital funding. He pointed out that given the current financial climate it was no longer appropriate to have a one-off annual budget setting process and referred to actions taken before Christmas with regard to service changes and the recent changes to base budgets arising from the senior management restructure, expressions of interest from staff in relation to voluntary redundancy/reduced hours or flexible retirement and changes in customer care. The nationally agreed staff pay award at 2.2% against a backdrop of the reduction in the revenue budget of 3.7% left an overall (starting point) budget gap for Cabinet consideration of £16.526M for 2015/16.

The key elements of the strategy were explained to Members, in particular the use of the Medium Term Financial Planning & Service Transformation Reserve to support the implementation of service cuts and changes. He explained that the balance of this Reserve stood at £7.1M and that it was proposed to use £6.592M to help support the budget gap but pointed out that this would

significantly reduce the value of the Reserve and reduce flexibility in future years without a focus on actions to replenish it.

The Director of Financial Services welcomed Members' comments and feedback in relation to the points for discussion:

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 set out below.

1. Is the uplift proposed reasonable for schools?

A Member felt that in the current climate the proposal was reasonable.

A Member questioned whether any savings which might occur as a result of the planned re-configuration of education for example in the Rhondda area had been considered as part of the budget strategy. The Director of Financial Services explained that savings from school remodelling are being set aside to match fund Welsh Government 21st Century Schools funding as part of plans to improve the overall school stock.

A Member wished to point out that in his opinion, education was the way out of poverty and he stressed the importance of ensuring that children and young people had the education they deserved.

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

A Member suggested that delivering on the proposed £9.3M efficiency savings would be commendable.

A Member referred to the Staff Panel and the Director of Financial Services explained that this had been formed to consider staff and public suggestions with regard to making savings and these would be factored in as appropriate and once recommendations and decisions are made. He informed the Committee that the Cabinet Member for Council Business & Corporate Affairs sat on the Panel.

A Member voiced his concern with regard to the continued quest for efficiency savings on two counts. Firstly, he was concerned that it could lead to a gradual erosion of a service and secondly that it added to the suggestion that local government is inefficient.

3. Do you agree with the other elements of the budget strategy ?

A Member asked whether any consultation had taken place with businesses with regard to the increases in Trade Waste Charges which were significant. She also commented that these users of the service were usually adept at lobbying.

The Director of Financial Services explained that the General Budget Consultation process (which includes an on line questionnaire) is being used for this purpose. He further clarified the objectives of the charges namely to encourage traders to recycle (and relayed feedback provided to the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee by the Director Highways and Streetcare Services).

A Member explained that the traders would not be happy about the increase in charges and that not all their waste would be recyclable.

Another Member questioned how the Council's fees compared with private waste contractors.

The Director of Financial Services reported that the Director of Highways & Streetcare Services had explained that it was difficult to have accurate information in relation to private sector charges. However, should traders wish to move to private contractors it would still be beneficial to the Council as their residual waste would not be counted against the Council in terms of recycling performance..

A Member questioned whether the revenue from the sale of properties had been included as part of the strategy and the Director confirmed that capital receipts could only be used to support capital expenditure.

A Member commented that if asking the public to recycle the Council needed to ensure that there was an adequate supply of recycling bags available in all areas of the County Borough.

Another Member emphasised the need to ensure that people were properly informed.

4. Medium Term Financial Planning & Service – what are your views on the use of the transition funding?

The Chair asked how this Transformation Reserve could be replenished to which the Director of Financial Services explained that could mean taking action to deliver services differently and making difficult decisions leading to a reduction in services. He added that making decisions early would provide more opportunity to make savings and to replenish the reserve.

A Member questioned what would happen if the transition fund could not be refilled for next year and it was explained that the Council had a legal obligation to produce a balanced budget each year, that the starting point for 2016/17 is a gap of £27M and that this would need to be fully dealt with by reducing base budget spend.

A Member pointed out that there would be little left in the Transitional Fund and questioned how the Council would be able to deal with any other contingency. The Director of Financial Services explained that the Council would continue to

hold £10m in its General Fund Reserves which was separate from the Transition Funding.

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

A Member asked how many in Band A of Band B properties paid Council Tax. The Director of Financial Services explained that a significant proportion of households either paid no Council Tax or received some support through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

6. Any other comments?

A Member referred to the comments made in the media the previous evening by the Minister for Health and Social Services which suggested that money had been diverted from health to social care.

The Group Director, Community & Children's Services commented that he was only aware of the Transformation Grant at this point. The Director of Financial Services explained that in total there was £750M in specific grant funding to be allocated across Wales, the detailed allocations of which were still largely to be confirmed.

41. PRESENTATION – THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING ADVICE SERVICE

The Head of Community Housing Services introduced himself and his colleague, Ms Cheryl Emery, the Housing Options, Homelessness & Supporting People Manager and explained that the presentation would provide Members with an overview of the service, including current performance, services provided and preparation for changes to legislation in respect of service delivery which will come into force on 27th April 2015.

The Housing Options, Homelessness & Supporting People Manager thanked Members for the invitation to provide information on the work of the Housing Advice Centre and with the aid of PowerPoint slides proceeded to make her presentation.

The Manager outlined how her service worked in partnership with other departments of the Council such as Housing Benefits and also worked in partnership with six social housing providers as well as providing a housing support service to vulnerable people.

The Committee was provided with an overview of the performance of the service which is performing above the Wales Average. The Manager explained that the service is a highly regulated area and is also liable to scrutiny from organisations such as Shelter Cymru. She explained that some time ago a decision had been taken to reconfigure the service toward a more proactive preventative approach which will stand them in good stead for the requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 which requires local authorities to;

- Take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness to those presenting;

- Earlier intervention - within 56 days;
- Undertake a Housing and Support needs assessment;
- Discharge of duty into the Private rented sector;
- Opt into Intentionality.

The Manager explained that the service is fortunate to have a purpose built Housing Advice Resource which benefits from a high street location and provides a multi agency service. She also explained that they provided help and advice across tenure and will not turn anyone away with help not only targeted at the homelessness. The service does not operate in isolation, for example, Shelter Cymru have a clinic at the Centre and that the Gofal mental health charity have three members of staff linked to the Advice Centre, one based at the Royal Glamorgan Hospital to ensure that there were no unsafe patient discharges and two others who support those attending the Advice Centre with mental health issues.

Members were informed of the staff structure which is based around three teams, the Supporting People Team, the Common Housing Register Team and the Housing Solutions Team. The Manager also explained the importance of the specialist roles which have been introduced ie a specialist prison link officer and a private rented sector development officer. She explained that the high level of offenders returning to the community is a pressure on the service but that the introduction of the post has proved to be very successful over a short period of time and had won the Cymorth Homelessness Prevention Award. It was reported that the shortage of 1 and 2 bedroom properties in the social housing sector had driven the move toward working with the Private Rented Sector. However, there is a shortage of affordable accommodation especially in the Southern areas of the County Borough and a low Local Housing Allowance made it difficult to find suitable accommodation. She explained that the under 35's are experiencing particular difficulties due to the single person's rent allowance and the Service is exploring innovative ways to address this problem such as the development of three shared properties. She also explained that a Housing Management Service is provided for landlords as well.

The Manager explained that as well working with Shelter Cymru and Gofal, the Centre also hosted a Social Services After Care Worker and Support Worker as well as a Housing Law Surgery and Debt Advice Surgery and a Llamau Family Mediation Officer.

Members were provided with statistics which highlighted the success of the service in preventing homelessness and made aware of the links with a number of Supporting People projects and the ongoing challenges of securing suitable and affordable accommodation in areas of high demand alongside an increasing number of single people presenting with complex needs.

The Group Director, Community & Children's Services commented on the excellent service provided by the Housing Advice Centre which he regarded as effective and efficient and deserving of a great deal of credit.

Several Members wished to convey their thanks to the Housing Options, Homelessness & Supporting People Manager and her staff in relation to the excellent help and support that had been provided to residents in their communities.

A Member drew attention to the discrepancies in the amount of Local Housing Allowance paid for comparable properties within her ward due to some properties falling within the Bridgend area rather than Rhondda Cynon Taf.

The Head of Community Housing explained that whilst rents in Rhondda Cynon Taf are higher in some areas than others, they are still not as high as those in Bridgend and Cardiff. However, it is proving difficult to identify suitable accommodation that people can afford. He informed Members that the Local Housing Allowance is set by the Welsh Government's Rent Officer and that the Authority has no control over this matter.

A Member asked whether it is known if many of the Centre's users are in employment pointing out that many owner occupiers are struggling in the current financial climate.

The Head of Community Housing responded that information in this respect is limited but explained that the service does try to assist clients in seeking employment. The Housing Options, Homelessness & Supporting People Manager informed the Committee of a new IT system which will provide a direct link to Job Wales.

RESOLVED to note the good work being undertaken by the Housing Advice Service.

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

42. SOCIAL SERVICES & WELLBEING ACT (WALES) 2014 – TRANSFORMATION GRANT UPDATE

Further to the report considered by the Committee on 4th November 2014 (min 27 refers) in relation to the implementation of the Social Services & Wellbeing Act (Wales) 2014, Members were presented with an update report in respect of the Delivering Transformation Grant. The Committee was informed that the Welsh Government had set a number of priorities for the use of the Grant namely:

- the undertaking of a self assessment to determine the Authority's preparedness for the duties required under the Act;
- the establishment of a political/officer level leadership to sustain a programme of change through to 2016 to include a Partnership Forum, Leadership Group and from 2015-16 a Citizen's Panel in each region;
- The creation of a regional implementation plan, agreed with the NHS, 3rd Sector and private sector partners by March 2015 reflecting the key priorities and responsibilities for delivery and driving forward the programme of change required to implement the Act across the region.

The Group Director explained that he thought it important that the Committee had sight of the assessment tool kit to highlight the scale of the challenge presented. He informed Members that it had been decided that Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil should submit separate assessments to enable the identification any differences at the baseline stage. He explained that the turnaround time for completion had been tight as the toolkit had not been launched until 6th December 2014. However, the first meeting of the Partnership Board had taken place earlier that day where the information gathered had been considered and the initial self assessment would be submitted to the Welsh Government by 31st January 2015.

It was reported that the Regional Public Engagement arrangements have not yet been established but that work was underway and that work on the development of the Regional Implementation Plan would take place during the next couple of months in preparation for submission to the Welsh Government at the of March 2015. The Group Director explained that whilst there was little that was tangible to report at the present time he suggested that a further update report be presented to scrutiny toward the end of March.

Members responded that they would welcome the opportunity to comment on the Plan before finalisation.

A Member referred to page 47 of the toolkit (page 62 of the agenda) which referred to Looked After and Accommodated Children, and suggested that the information which was being requested in relation to the range of accommodation options available should be extended to the show the mix of provision between local authority and private sector.

In response to questions, the Group Director explained that all the Social Services and Wellbeing Boards were in the same position in trying to prepare for the requirements of the Act and that a small amount of funding from the Association of Directors for Social Services (Wale) had been secured to try and obtain an accurate baseline picture.

RESOLVED:

- (i) to note the current position in relation to the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) 2014;
- (ii) to receive a further report in relation to the development of the Regional Implementation Plan in due course.

(Mrs) M E Davies
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.15 pm.