

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, on Tuesday, 10th December 2013 at 4.00 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor G Stacey – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

H Boggis
(Mrs) M Tegg
M Weaver
R Yeo

(Mrs) J Cass
(Mrs) J S Ward
E Webster

M A Norris
P Wasley
D W Weeks

Members in attendance

County Borough Councillors
(Mrs) C Leyshon
R K Turner

Officers:

Mr P J Lucas – Director of Legal and Democratic Services
Ms J Cook – Director of Regeneration & Planning
Mr C Lee – Director of Financial Services
Ms Ann Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

25. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors J David, (Mrs) M E Davies and S Lloyd.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED to note that in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct there were no declarations of personal interest in relation to the agenda.

27. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee held on the 8th October 2013 be approved as a correct record.

28. MATTERS ARISING

Minute 20 – Treasury Management - In response to a query relating to the continued low return on investments, the Director of Financial Services

reported that future investment strategies would depend on the market conditions at the time and be subject to a risk assessment. He explained that the Council also received advice from its specialist Treasury Management advisors.

Minute 22 – Exception Report – In response to the concerns raised in relation to the sickness absence figures for Corporate Estates, the Scrutiny Support Officer reported that the Director of Corporate Estates had provided information to the Service Director, Performance and Resources setting out the sickness absence arrangements that operate within the service. Based on this, the Committee could be assured that the arrangements are in line with the Council's Sickness Absence policy. One of the main factors impacting on sickness absence during quarter 1 had been two employees having family bereavements; these officers have now returned to the workplace.

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, CORPORATE SERVICES

29. GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION

The Director of Financial Services provided the Committee with a presentation in relation to the General Budget Strategy consultation process which he explained would focus on the three key areas, namely, services and priorities, Council Tax levels and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. He pointed out that it did not include the separate consultation activity in respect of service change proposals. As a result of this other consultation activity he explained that the general budget consultation process would be focussed on the Scrutiny Committees, the Schools Budget Forum and the public via online/hard copy questionnaires.

The Director of Financial Services drew Members' attention to some key facts relating to the Council's Revenue spending and the key headlines relating to the Welsh Government's Provisional Settlement. He informed Members that it was expected that the details of the Welsh Government's Final Settlement would be available on 11th December 2013. He also referenced previous presentations to Council by the Group Director, Corporate Services where it was projected that the Council would need to bridge an expected funding gap of up to £19.6M in 2014/15, rising cumulatively to £70M by 2017/18. He explained key aspects of the provisional settlement including the Welsh Government direction that local authorities are to increase school budgets by 0.9% in 2014/15. He also reported on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the implications for the residents of the County Borough.

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 its recommendations to Council.

RESOLVED that the views of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee be passed on to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in consideration of the Council's Service Improvement Priorities and Budget Proposals for 2014-2015 and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, as follows:

1. Service & Improvement Priorities

A Member commented that whilst he agreed with the seven priorities and thought that they should be retained, he felt that there should be an additional priority, namely, that the Council should look for opportunities to increase revenue. Potential areas could be Biomass energy through utilising the Council's Countryside services

The Director of Financial Services agreed that income generation was important and this was a key element within the remit of the priority - 'Delivering within our means'.

A Member questioned whether enough was being done to promote the County Borough as a destination for tourists, for example, walkers.

2 Budget Consultation 2014/15 – Views on the level of support proposed by the Welsh Government for next year?

When comparing the provisional settlement figures for the last 10 years a Member queried whether there had been too much funding in the past.

The Director of Financial Services indicated that he was only able to set out the figures as fact in the graph. He did indicate some caution in interpreting the graph, particularly around the impact of transfers that may have occurred during the years which can distort comparisons on an annual basis. However, whilst these anomalies do exist, it was clear that the budget was now significantly reduced. In response to a further query he explained that any revenue impact of Housing pre transfer was not included as this had previously been accounted for as part of a separate Housing Revenue Account.

3. Budget Consultation 2014/15 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2014/15?

A Member pointed out that increasing the level of Council Tax would not produce enough revenue to bridge the funding gap.

The Director of Financial Services explained that whilst the Welsh Government had not imposed a cap the underlying message from the Minister was that there should be no large increases in Council Tax.

A Member commented that the level should be kept under 4%.

Another Member commented that it had to be appreciated that the level of unemployment was high.

For clarification the Director of Financial Services explained that of the 100,000 households in Rhondda Cynon Taf, 30,000 received some sort of Council Tax relief whilst 20,000 of these received full support.

4 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme – Views on the Council’s Discretionary decisions that may be added to the National Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

A Member suggested that the current discretions were reasonable and should remain and this view was generally held by most Members.

A Member did comment that in her opinion there should be no backdating of claims.

5. Any other Comments?

There were no further comments.

30. MARK OF RESPECT

At this juncture of the meeting Members stood as a mark of respect in memory of Nelson Mandela.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

31. EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT- 30TH SEPTEMBER 2013 (QUARTER 2).

The Director of Financial Services presented Members with the Exception Report which outlined the financial and performance management information for the Corporate Services Group and Chief Executive’s Division for the period to 30th September 2013. Members were asked to consider the key issues extracted from the main report that had been presented to the Cabinet Performance and Resources Committee on the 18th November 2013, which included details in relation to the revenue and capital budgets, Treasury Management position, overall performance indicator results, operational performance in terms of the Wales Programme for Improvement action plan Regeneration of our Communities: Physical Regeneration

The Director of Financial Services reported that the underspend within Financial Services was mainly related to temporary staffing vacancies.

A Member raised concerns in relation to the percentage of appeals determined that upheld the Authority’s decision in relation to planning application decisions and enforcement notices and in particular questioned the outcomes of appeals where decisions had been made contrary to officer recommendation. He raised the issue of Member training and referenced the draft Welsh Government Planning (Wales) Bill.

The Director of Regeneration and Planning explained that the Council's record in relation to appeals raised a number of issues. She reported that about 60% of appeals were allowed in relation to decisions taken against officer recommendation. However, the number of appeals that were allowed when the decision had been in line with officer recommendations was approximately 6% which was a big difference. These figures related just to Committee decisions. Whilst the numbers in total were not huge there were some themes coming through such as Members' concerns associated with the need for car parking. With reference to the new draft Planning (Wales) Bill there are likely to be some significant changes to the planning system although at this early stage there is still a high level of uncertainty with regard to a number of issues.

The Director of Legal and Democratic Services explained that whilst scrutiny was unable to consider individual planning applications the Committee could consider thematic issues or trends and suggested that the Committee could receive a report at its next meeting.

A Member suggested that it might be useful to consider any trends post election as the introduction of new members could impact on decisions.

A Member reported that she had rung the Customer Care line recently to be told that she was 13th in the queue. Members of the Committee were surprised at this commenting that in their experience they always received a quick response. The Director of Financial Services reported that he would pass on her concerns.

A Member asked whether the local development workshops for suppliers were well attended. The Director of Regeneration and Planning explained that this specific information would be held by the Service Director for Procurement. However, the two service areas were working together and example being working with the developers of the large wind farm projects to ensure that the investment can feed into the supply chain of the local economy. She added that the timings of the Meet the Buyer events were critical to ensure that local businesses were aware of opportunities to tender for contracts and this is key to levels of attendance.

A Member queried the drop in the number of visits to Museums and the Director of Financial Services reported that he would enquire with the service as to the reason. The Member asked whether it was possible to break down the revenue earned from these buildings such as cafeteria or events. The Director of Financial Services reported that it was possible and built on the earlier suggestion of increasing the opportunities for income generation.

A Member pointed out that whilst the number of benefit fraud investigations carried out had increased the number of prosecutions had dropped. The Director of Financial Services reported that the reason was likely to be timing between periods, however, he would confirm the reason and report back. He confirmed that the Government was introducing a new Single Fraud

Investigation Service as part of their Welfare Reform which would see the DWP taking over responsibility for fraud investigations.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the content of the report;
- (ii) To receive a report from the Director of Regeneration and Planning at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee to consider trends in relation to decisions taken against officer recommendation;

G Stacey
Chairman

The meeting closed at 4.50 pm.