

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 Wednesday, 3rd December 2014 at 4.00 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor M Norris – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

H Boggis
P Griffiths
D W Weeks

S Carter
G Stacey
C Willis

J David
(Mrs) M Tegg
R Yeo

Officers:

Mr P J Lucas – Director of Legal & Democratic Services
Mr B Davies – Director of Financial Services
Mr N Elliott – Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing
Mr S Gale – Service Director Planning
Ms Ann Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

37. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors (Mrs) J Cass, (Mrs) M E Davies, S Lloyd, S Rees-Owen, (Mrs) J S Ward, P Wasley and E Webster.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, the following declaration of personal interest was received in relation to Agenda Item 4 – Council Performance Exception Report Quarter 2 – County Borough Councillor H Boggis declared a personal non-prejudicial interest – “The organisation I work for is in receipt of Communities First Funding”.

39. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee be approved as a correct record:

- (i) The meeting held on 5th November 2014;
- (ii) The special meeting held on 13th November 2014;
- (ii) The special meeting held on 18th November 2014.

40. GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION

The Director of Financial Services provided Members with a presentation in respect of the General Budget Consultation Process, advising that there would be three key elements to the presentation, the service improvement

priorities, the Council Tax Levels and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The Director stressed the fact that the general budget consultation did not include consultation activity in respect of proposed service changes (Funding for Nursery, Music and Sports Pitch Charges), as they as these are subject to separate consultations.

The Director of Financial Services outlined the consultation process which has involved the Older Persons Advisory Group, Schools Budget Forum and the public generally through an on line and hard copy questionnaire and with the opportunity also taken to gather feedback via the service change drop in sessions. Members' attention was drawn to some key facts relating to the funding of the Council's Revenue Budget and what it is spent on. The key headlines relating to the Welsh Government's Provisional Settlement which had been announced on the 8th October were outlined including a Reduction in resources for this council of -3.8%, the effect of a floor mechanism within the settlement and the Welsh Government direction that local authorities are to increase school budgets by 0.6% in 2015/16. Attention was also drawn to the starting point budget gap to 2017/18. It was reported that the Final Settlement was due to be announced on the 10th December.

The Director of Financial Services also reported on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the implications for the residents of the County Borough. Members were asked a series of questions and informed that their views, along with all other consultees would be used to assist Cabinet in its deliberations before producing their draft budget strategy which will be consulted upon as part of stage 2 of the general budget consultation process.

Before responding to the set questions, a Member asked how much confidence could be placed in the deficit predictions and pointed out the need to be mindful of local authority mergers. The Director of Financial Services reported that in the absence of any further indications from WG an assumption of a 3% budget reduction had been used for modelling purposes. He also explained that with regard to any potential mergers there had been no detailed modelling work undertaken by this Council at this stage. The Director of Legal & Democratic Services clarified the position with regard to the decision taken by Council in response to the Minister's statement in relation to local authority mergers and pointed out the likely timescales of non-voluntary mergers.

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 2015-2016 and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, as follows:

1. Service & Improvement Priorities

A Member commented that he hoped that Children's Services would be prioritised.

These minutes are subject to approval at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee

A Member suggested that there was a disconnect in that if Adult and Children's Care Services and Education are afforded any protection, given their sizeable portion of the available budget a decline in the other service areas would be unavoidable. He questioned whether there was a need for a more honest approach in dealing with the harsh reality of the budget situation.

The Chairman commented that in an ideal world those listed priorities were reasonable but the three main priorities had to be Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education.

A Member voiced his concern that the Council was in danger raising expectations without the finance to deliver.

The Director of Financial Services explained that the seven priorities all have detailed action plans sitting below, the detail of which would have regard to resources available.

2. Budget Consultation 2015/16 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2014/15?

A Member explained that whilst last year he was of the opinion that Council Tax levels should rise to help retain services, his view had now changed and he hoped that a rise in Council Tax would be kept to a reasonable level. He felt that the public would be disillusioned with another large rise in Council Tax when services were being cut.

A Member commented that if people wanted to keep services they would have to pay.

A Member pointed out that he was meeting people in his community every day who were commenting that they had not received a pay rise for 3,4 or even 5 years and yet the level of Council Tax was increasing year on year. They also argue that in England the rate has been frozen. He explained that whilst in the past he had been able to argue that Council Tax levels in Wales were 20% lower than in England he was not sure if this was still the case given that they had now had a 3 year Council Tax freeze. He commented that he would like to see a comparison undertaken on equal properties and if rates were now higher in Rhondda Cynon Taf it would be difficult to justify further increases.

A Member pointed to the potential complications should there be local authority mergers with regard to different levels of Council Tax.

A Member commented that in his opinion, any rise had to be below 5%.

A Member pointed out that any rise in the police precept would be an additional burden for residents.

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

Members were in agreement that the current discretions should remain.

4. **Any other Comments?**

There were no further comments.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

41. **EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT- 30TH SEPTEMBER 2014 (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 2014. 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 20th November 2014, 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 Improving our Communities: Social & Physical Regeneration. He also referred to the Outcome Agreement area within the remit of the Committee, namely, Growth and Sustainable Jobs – improving skills for employment.

The Director of Financial Services reported that the underspend within Financial Services was mainly related to temporary staffing vacancies. Following the presentation of the report the Chairman invited questions.

A Member referred to the positive exception highlighted at page 20 of the report ie ‘Average number of days all homeless families with children spent in Bed & Breakfast accommodation (local)’. Quarter 2 performance was 5.5% compared to a target of 15% and the Member asked for an explanation.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing explained that this was a volatile performance indicator due to the small number of families involved. As a result just one additional family needing bed and breakfast accommodation can impact significantly on actual performance. He reported that whilst current performance was favourable against target it was slightly higher than achieved in 2013/14 but nonetheless compared favourably with other authorities. The Service Director reported that the service worked hard to prevent homelessness and would only in emergencies place families in bed and breakfast accommodation.

A Member commented that to outperform other authorities in Wales was commendable and would welcome the opportunity to meet the people who manage the service.

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The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing explained that over recent years the Council's Housing Advice Centre had increasingly focussed on preventative work through the introduction of a Housing Solutions based operating model. He explained that the Service has well established working relationship with all partners, including Shelter Cymru who sit in the Housing Advice Centre. The Service Director reported that additional funding had been used to employ Staff with specialist areas, for example in relation to prisoner leavers and private sector landlords, which had seen an increase in good quality private sector properties for homeless people.

A Member asked whether the new Housing Allocation scheme would make a difference.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that both he and the Service Director Public Health and Protection worked closely together and the new Housing Solutions Model together with the work undertaken with the Common Housing Register and the work with landlords should all combine to ensure an effective service.

A Member commented that she had reason to work closely with the Housing Advice Centre and wished to commend the staff.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that he would be happy to make a presentation to the next meeting of the Committee

A Member referred to the list of exceptions on page 20 of the report and asked whether they could be better aligned based on the service. The Director of Financial Services responded that he would consider whether the presentation of the information could be improved.

A Member referred to the performance exception in relation to the % of major planning applications determined during the year within 8 weeks and asked whether the reform of the planning process in Wales would assist the approval rate.

The Service Director, Planning explained that this particular performance indicator was a challenge for every Council and also pointed out that major planning applications needed to be considered properly. He confirmed that the Welsh Government's review of the planning process would likely lead to a change in the performance measure.

RESOLVED:

- (i) to note the content of the report;
- (ii) that a presentation be brought to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee in respect of the work of the Housing Advice Centre.

M Norris
Chairman

The meeting closed at 5.05 pm