

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held at The Council Headquarters, The Pavilions, Clydach Vale on Monday 2nd December 2013, at 5.00 p.m.

Present

County Borough Councillor G R Davies – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors

S Bradwick	(Mrs) L De Vet	J Elliott	P Howe	L Langford
(Mrs) S Pickering	S Powderhill	(Mrs) A Roberts	G Smith	(Mrs) M Tegg
R K Turner	J Watts	M Weaver		

Officers

Mr G Jones – Group Director, Environmental Services
Mr N Wheeler – Service Director, StreetCare
Mr P Mee – Service Director, Public Health & Protection
Mr N Brinn – Service Director, Highways, Transportation & Strategic Projects
Ms S Davies – Head of Cultural Services
Mr D Batten - Head of Leisure Parks & Countryside
Mr C Lee – Director of Finance
Mr A Wilkins – Corporate & Democratic Services Solicitor
Mr R Jones – Cemeteries Operation Manager
Ms J Parish - Administration Manager and Registrar
Mr C Lewis – Superintendent & Registrar

33. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors (Mrs) J Bonetto, G Holmes and (Mrs) T Williams.

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct there were no personal interests pertaining to the agenda, declared at the meeting.

35. MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee held on the 11th November, 2013 as an accurate record.

36 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, as they would be reported via separate consultations.

The Director of Financial Services outlined the consultation process and 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.

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 making their recommendations to Council.

RESOLVED that the views of the Environmental 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, as well as views on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, as follows:

1. Service & Improvement Priorities

One Member of the Committee commented that he agreed that the current seven proprieties were the right priorities to be looked at and felt that these should not be changed in the future.

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

The Chairman queried whether there was an increase in grants apposed to general funding. The Director of Finance confirmed that there had been an increase, although the grants were set aside for specific purposes.

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

Members of the Committee commented that the position was 'grim' and commented on the difficulties in providing their views when the picture was so bleak. Members commented that the Council Tax could not be increased by too much; due to the current austerity measures and its impact on the County Borough, yet neither could the Council Tax be set too low, as services would not be delivered. One Member commented that he felt he was unable to express a view on the area.

The Director of Finance advised Members that setting of the Budget and Council Tax would need to be considered by Members at Council during March 2014, so views would be needed in the future.

One Member commented on the additional precepts that would be added to the Council Tax, which would be out of their control.

The Chairman expressed his view that he would consider a 1% increase to Council Tax rates if this meant additional finances were available to save services such as libraries. The Director of Finance advised that increasing the Council Tax level alone was not sufficient to bridge the funding gap projected for 2014/15.

One Member commented on the unpopular decisions that would need to be made with reference to Council Tax, but commented on the need for services to be preserved, which would not be achieved if Council Tax levels were reduced or stayed the same.

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

The Chairman commented that the 4 week period of Council Tax Reduction was a reasonable period for those individuals going back to work. He commented that this period still encouraged individuals back into work.

5. Any other Comments?

One Member queried whether Council Tax payments could be made over a 12 month period rather than 10 months to assist residents with smaller monthly contributions. The Director of Financial Services advised that whilst the standard was a 10 month payment arrangement, individual circumstances could be looked at and arrangements made to offer 12 months payment if this supported full payment by individuals.

The Chairman thanked the officer for his presentation.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

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

The Director, Financial Services presented to Members the Exception Report agreed at the meeting of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny, which outlined the financial and performance management information for Environmental Services for the period to 30th September 2013. Members were asked to consider key issues extracted from the main report that had been presented to Cabinet Performance and Resources Committee on the 18th November 2013.

The Service Director, Streetcare was queried on the overspend in waste services, especially following the estimated savings projected following amendment to the service. The Committee were advised of the two factors contributing to the overspend, which related to a poor take up of special collection and the success of the nappy collection scheme. The Service Director advised that in respect of bulky collection, the service had witnessed an increase in the usage of Community recycling facilities instead. The Committee were also reminded of the success of the nappy collection scheme and the need for new vehicles to assist with the collections, which was currently out to tender.

The Head of Cultural Services was asked to explain the overspend in relation to cultural services and the Committee were informed that the theatre programmes developed required an increase in technical resources and staffing in respect of Health and Safety requirements. The Head of Service commented that as the service was non statutory there was a need to balance the expenditure and income, and the service had noted a fall in secondary item expenditure. The third factor to the overspend was in relation to the drop in the number of theatres being hired out, which could be attributed to the current financial climate and the financial pressures on the theatre groups themselves. Following further queries the Head of Service advised of the protected and non protected fees for theatre group customers and confirmed that there were no premium rate costs for hiring of the theatres.

The new car parking schemes referenced within the Exception report were highlighted by Members and the Service Director, Highways, Transportation and Strategic projects advised of the recent acquisition to the goods yard car park in Pontypridd, which was previously partly leased to the Council. An update was also provided regarding the minor improvements to High Street car park in Aberdare, with the necessary order being processed in the New Year. A further query was raised in relation to the Free Christmas Parking scheme within certain car parks within the County Borough in the run up to Christmas and although members welcomed the initiative for boosting town centre trade, members queried the potential car park revenue loss. The Service Director commented that previously there had been a loss of income of around £10,000 per week associated with previous similar initiatives, although he commented on the need for diligence with the schemes operating hours as payments may be made when no charge is required

The Service Director, Public Health and Protection advised Members of the contributing factors for the missed inspections during the quarter, which related to both the complexity of the inspections which concerned medical weighing equipment at hospitals and staffing issues, which have now been resolved. The outstanding inspections were being completed during quarter 3. The Service Director also took the opportunity to inform Members of the different inspection timescales for both trading standards and health and safety.

The Chairman sought clarification on the terminology of 'negative closures' within the 'Protecting People from Harm' Action Plan and also queried the measures in place to keep people within the service provided. The Service Director, Public Health & Protection advised that there were 3 scenarios for users of the service to be classed as a 'negative closure' which revolved around non attendance or relapse; breach of contract and finally bereavement. The Officer also advised of the increased access made available to users of the service.

A query was raised on the revised timescales of the review and reconfiguration to the specialist secondary care substance misuse treatment service. The Committee were informed that the complexity of the review had been underestimated and that the scope of the review had been extended to include services commissioned by both the Council and LHB through the Area Planning Board, although progress was being made.

One committee member queried the engagement with GPs following the proposed new signposting schemes for victims of domestic abuse. The Service Director, Public Health & Protection commented on the difficulties previously experienced with such engagement and the continued reluctance by GPs to engage in the process. The Service Director, further commented on the GP development days and the proposed legislation from the Welsh Government with 'ask & act' which would hopefully assist with the engagement.

The Service Director, Street Care was queried on the details within the Exception report relating to the drop in food waste recycling rates. The Officers advised the Committee that in the recent months there had been an increase in food waste and attributed the previous reported drop in recycling rates to the difficulties getting replacement food waste bins out to residents. A committee member further questioned the effectiveness of the warning letters, following 708 letters being issued and only one fixed penalty notice being issued. The Service Director, Street Care advised that limited fixed penalty notices had been issued due to the recent changes in the service and the problems experienced with missed collections. Members of the Committee queried the fixed penalty notices in relation to underage alcohol sales and the fixed fines. The Service Director, Public Health & Protection advised of the 2 potential offences and the varying fines for each offence.

In relation to the 'promoting a fair trading environment' outcome, the Service Director, Public Health & Protection was questioned on the events referred to

for elderly people in relation to doorstep crime. The Service Director advised of the door step crime within the County Borough targeted at vulnerable residents, particularly the elderly and the introduction of events to raise awareness to the elderly. The Committee were advised that no events had been held during Quarter 2, as the right opportunity had not arisen, but that 3 events had taken place within quarter 3. Committee members proceeded to advise of the positive awareness raising through the 'no cold caller signs' and commented on the need for such events to be easily accessible for elderly residents within the Community. The Service Director confirmed that companies ignoring the cold caller signs were committing an offence.

Members of the Committee queried the progress to date with the Collaborative arrangements for Trading Standards in the Cwm Taf region and the membership of its Governance Board. The Service Director, Public Health & Protection confirmed the small officer membership for the Governance Board and advised of the benefits witnessed with the collaborative working, highlighting consistency of working and the benefits of officer specialism.

The Service Director, StreetCare was queried as to the targets set on delivering cleaner streets, and whether the targets were challenging enough when comparing the targets to the current achievement. The Service Director confirmed that the targets were a realistic target set.

Following a query the Service Director, StreetCare provided details on the planned lunchtime littering project at Tonyrefail School and the reason for the initiative was provided. The Officer commented that similar projects were being undertaken else where within the County Borough.

The Chairman thanked the officers for their detailed responses and the Committee **RESOLVED** to note the information contained within the report.

REPORTS OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES.

38 BEREAVEMENT SERVICES.

Through his report and with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation the Service Director, Public Health & Protection provided the Committee with an overview of Bereavement Services in Rhondda Cynon Taf, highlighting key issues for discussion and opportunities for collaboration. The Service Director also introduced the Bereavement Services Operational Manager, the Administration Manager and Superintendent Registrar and the Superintendent & Registrar for Llwydcoed Crematorium.

The Committee were advised of the Council's fourteen cemeteries located across the County Borough and the one crematorium in Glyntaff, Pontypridd. In 2012 the Council also took over direct responsibility for the grounds maintenance at Llwydcoed Crematorium following the decision of the Joint management Committee to harmonise operational management arrangements with the Council.

Through the use of the PowerPoint presentation the Service Director, Public Health and Protection advised Members of the principal challenges for consideration for the service in relation to capital programme, cremator replacements, capacity for burials, fees & charges, memorial safety and grass cutting and grounds maintenance. The Service Director concluded his presentation by discussing the opportunities for collaboration although the Committee were advised that at the moment there was no benefit to the Authority in exploring a private sector partnership in relation to either Llwydcoed or Gyntaff crematorium, which are run in a cost effective manner by the Joint Committee and the Council. The Officer commented that a further opportunity for collaboration would be to join up the services with a neighbouring local authority thereby realising efficiencies in management and other economies in scale. The Committee were reminded that initial discussions with a neighbouring local authority had been made during 2009/10 and it was determined at that time that such an arrangement would result in neither financial benefit nor service improvement.

The Chairman thanked the Service Director, Public Health and Protection for his detailed presentation and opened up the item to questions. Members of the Committee queried the surcharge on fees and charges for the purchase of a grave to a non resident of Rhondda Cynon Taf and Members commented on the difficulty in justifying the charge and commented on the need for the charges in this respect to be reviewed.

Members of the Committee queried the lifespan of the crematoriums and the cost. The Service Director confirmed that well maintained crematoria's would be expected to last between 15 -20 years before needing to be replaced. The Officer continued by advising that the cost of replacing the two cremators at each of the Crematoria, including installing of the required abatement equipment, was in the region of £1.5million.

One Member of the Committee commented on his experience with the grass cuttings within the cemeteries, commenting that the service seemed to vary across the year. The Service Director, commented that the success of the grass cutting work at the cemeteries was subject to the weather and growing conditions, which was out of the Councils control.

Following Members comments and questions the Committee **RESOLVED:-**

- a) To note the information within the report.
- b) That the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee conducts a future visit to the Glyntaff Crematorium.
- c) That the Committee recommend that Cabinet review the fees and charges for the purchase of a grave to a non resident of RCT.

Cllr G Davies
Chairman

The meeting closed at 7:05pm.

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