

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, on Wednesday, 18th December 2013 at 5 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor R K Turner – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

H Boggis
P Jarman
G Stacey

G R Davies
(Mrs) C Leyshon
P Wasley

(Mrs) M E Davies
M A Norris

Officers in Attendance:

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

Mr C Lee – Director of Financial Services

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

Ms A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors S Bradwick, (Mrs) A Crimmings, G Hopkins, (Mrs) S Rees and G Thomas.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED to note that in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, the following declaration of personal interest was made:

County Borough Councillor H Boggis in relation to Agenda Item 5 – Fframwaith Children & Young People's Partnership – Reporting Mechanism for Scrutiny – My employer is in receipt of Fframwaith Funding.

17. MINUTES

RESOLVED: to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 16th October 2013.

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, CORPORATE SERVICES

18. GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION

As all Members present had already received the presentation in relation to the General Budget Strategy consultation process at the service scrutiny committees, the Director of Financial Services provided the Committee with a brief overview of the consultation process which had considered the provisional settlement for 2014/15, the budget gap, service improvement priorities, Council Tax levels and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. He explained that the Committee had been provided with the comments from

the four service scrutiny committees for their consideration and subject to any additional comments from the Committee these would be fed through to the Cabinet in the new year.

The Chairman asked whether Members had any further comments to make in addition to those put forward.

In response to a query the Director of Financial Services confirmed that due to the additional public consultation process taking place in relation to proposed service changes, the General Budget Consultation had not included the usual focus groups. The Member pointed out that as these forums had become annual events many of the usual participants might have expected to be called upon. The Director of Financial Services indicated that the online survey had been made available to all, but that the Member's comment would be considered as part of planning for the second stage of the process.

The Chairman asked the Director of Financial Services to confirm whether he was right in thinking that the figures used for the presentation were modelled on the assumption of a 3.5% uplift in Council Tax and therefore should Members decide that there would be no rise this would increase the budget gap by just over £2m. The Director of Financial Services confirmed that this was the case.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the feedback from the four service scrutiny committees.
- (ii) That the feedback from the 4 service scrutiny committees be provided to the Cabinet in respect of the General Budget Consultation process.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

19. EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT (QUARTER 2)

The Director of Financial Services presented the Committee with the Performance Exception Reports for Quarter 2 which had been considered by each of the individual service scrutiny committees. Members had been provided with the feedback on the discussion points raised at the meetings.

The Director of Financial Services provided Members with an overview of the Council's position as a whole and he highlighted the key figures relating to budget and performance and drew their attention to the Council's Health Check included as a separate Appendix that provided a snapshot of the Authority's second quarter performance. He also reported that the Welsh Government had accepted the Authority's self assessment for 2012/13 and the Council had received its Outcome Agreement funding in full. He explained that the Outcome Agreement framework for 2013/14 was not yet complete but that this would be presented to scrutiny in due course.

The Director of Financial Services drew Members' attention to the Wales Programme for Improvement Plans within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee namely, Regeneration of Our Communities: Social

Regeneration and Medium Term Service Planning which were attached to the report for Members' consideration.

The Chairman invited Members to ask questions in relation to the information provided, in particular the two WPI action plans.

A Member questioned the options available to the Authority in respect of temporary accommodation given that the level of homelessness was likely to continue to rise as a consequence of the Bedroom Tax.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing reported that the Housing Advice Centre had seen a rise in both statutory and non statutory homelessness and this was expected to continue to increase. Whilst the preference is to find permanent accommodation for those presenting as homeless, there is little availability for those requiring 1 or 2 bedroom accommodation. He explained that the Council is working with the local Registered Social Landlords with a view to providing a long term solution to the problem through finding ways to increase the number of 1 and 2 bedroom homes. However, with regard to temporary accommodation he explained that the Council has a number of options:

- bed & breakfast - whilst not suitable for families does provide a short term option for some adults;
- Social Letting Agency –.The Council works in conjunction with Hafod Housing through an arrangement whereby 12 furnished properties are held for temporary accommodation. However, these tend to be 3 bedroom properties and the Council is continuing to work with Hafod to develop a way of providing more 1 or 2 bedroom properties. A pilot house-sharing scheme is also underway which involves 3 single people sharing a 3 bedroom house.
- The Council is also working with Cynon Taf Housing Association to develop a 10 bed emergency accommodation unit in the Cynon Valley.
- The Council is using Discretionary Housing Payments to prevent homelessness where appropriate as a short term measure;
- The Council is also continuing to promote supported lodgings as an alternative approach but is currently struggling to attract homeowners to volunteer as part of the scheme.
- A Private Sector Development post has been newly created at the Housing Advice Centre to work with the Private Sector Landlords with a view to developing enhanced accommodation opportunities..

A Member questioned whether any consideration is given to compatibility of tenants when housed at supported people properties. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing confirmed that risk assessments are undertaken as part of the allocation process.

In response to a query relating to the work being undertaken with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide an Engagement and Outreach Service to the Communities First Cluster areas the Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing reported that the outreach service was now rolled out across the 8 Communities First Clusters and being delivered in each of the 24 former Communities First Partnership areas. He reported that the take-up of outreach services in some areas was surprisingly low whilst in other areas the service was inundated. As part of the review it was intended to utilise existing core funding to ensure the availability of advice services to other areas of high

deprivation outside of the Communities First Clusters such as Cae Fardre in Church Village, Llanharan and Llanharri. The Service Director also reported that the advice review was still on-going and explained that the amended target at Quarter 2 had not been achieved due capacity issues.

Following a query, the Director of Financial Services confirmed that the total number of complaints upheld by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales for the first six months of the year to 30th September 2013 was two. In response to a request for further information the Director of Financial Services reported that he would obtain the details and report back.

A Member queried whether the DWP had released any further information in respect of the Universal Credit (UC) Local Support System Framework.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing explained that the DWP had expanded the roll out UC to 10 pilot areas from October 2013. The original guidance had been withdrawn by the DWP and was being re-written with the intention of there being a public consultation from October 2014 on a revised version to incorporate good practice learning from the pilot areas to inform the basis of service planning for the 2015/16 financial year.

A Member referred to the multi agency strategic group which was being established in respect of financial inclusion and asked which organisations were involved.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing explained that officers from a range of service areas in the Council would be involved such as Housing Strategy, Housing Benefits, Adult Education, Welfare Rights and Communities First. Along with representation from partner agencies including Interlink, local registered social landlords. CAB, Dragonsavers, Moneyline Cymru and the Coop Wales. The Service Director also explained that the Strategic Group is linked to the priorities included in the Prosperity theme of the Single Integrated Plan.

At this juncture the Chairman took the opportunity to inform the Committee that the Payday Loans Scrutiny Working Group had met the previous week and following a report from the Director of Customer Services and ICT they had recommended to the Executive that action be taken which would result in all those using Council IT facilities to access Payday Loan companies' websites being re-directed to a money advice page which would include reference to the local credit union, Dragonsavers.

A Member asked what benefit was hoped to be derived from the development of a Regional Strategic Employability Group with Merthyr.

The Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing reported that he considered the development a positive move providing the opportunity to share experience and provide a link with the rest of the South East Wales region which was especially important in developing bids for the new stream of European funding. It would provide the opportunity to share good practice, make better use of resources and therefore obtain value for money in tackling worklessness in the County Borough and across the region.

A Member referred to the Annual Review of the Single Integrated Plan and asked whether this would be presented to Members?

The Director of Financial Services explained that local authorities were still waiting for Welsh Government guidance with regard to the format of these annual reviews and therefore it was difficult to present a timeline. The Review document would provide a backward view of what had been achieved and also look forward to reflect any changes in priorities. He explained that as the SIP is a partnership document he expected that the review would need to be presented to all the partner members including the Council as well as be approved by the Local Service Board.

A Member referred to page 49 of the agenda which mentioned the delivery of a number of local initiatives designed to help improve employee attendance levels and asked for further details.

The Director of Financial Services reported that as well as a robust sickness absence process there had been a growth in the number of health and wellbeing initiatives such as the 'know your numbers' blood pressure checks, 'Love your heart' and 'Cycle to Work' which focussed on prevention.

The Member asked whether staff were engaging in these initiatives to which he responded that they very much were and that he was aware of a number of cases where staff had been advised to make an urgent appointment to see their GP.

A Member also pointed out that staff and members were also able to access the Council's physiotherapy service.

A Member pointed out that because of the volume of staff employed by the Council, sickness absence was a large expense. He suggested that the procurement service's sickness record seemed very good. The Director of Financial Services cautioned by explaining that the service had a relatively small headcount and whilst the figures were good at present it would only take one or two instances of long term absence to change this picture completely. He also pointed out the service area did not involve staff undertaking heavy manual work or having to work outside in the elements.

A Member referred to the utilisation of the Value for Money framework developed to inform potential efficiency review areas and asked how this helped to identify efficiencies.

The Director of Financial Services explained that within a financial services setting it was usual to only consider unit costs. However, this new initiative was now attempting to link cost and performance data more effectively and in doing so, determine whether value for money was being achieved. He explained that a service might underspend but have poor performance or vice versa. A more forensic approach was therefore being developed to inform service provision into the future.

A Member queried the Fairer Charging for adults under spend and asked for an explanation.

The Director of Financial Services explained that it had been difficult to estimate the response to the change in policy and more money had been collected than originally thought for a number of reasons. He reported that there had been an increase in demand and the Service Director, Direct Services, Business & Housing added that whilst some people had initially declined services following the changes to the price structure many had returned having realised the true costs involved.

A Member asked whether the installation of Smart meters had now been completed. The Director of Financial Services reported that as far as he was aware there were 5 left to install and this was scheduled to be done in early January.

A Member asked whether there was a charge to the Council for the installation to which the Director of Financial Service responded that there was no charge made by the energy companies and added that the delayed installation was down to a scheduling issue rather than cost.

A Member referred to the establishment of a member/officer working group to evaluate the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements and asked for details. The Director of Financial Services reported that he would obtain the details and report back.

A Member referred to the overspend in waste service and asked whether the budget was now back on track. The Director of Financial Services reported that the overspend had been as a result of the poor take-up of bulky waste collections and the success of the nappy collection service. An update on the overall budget position would be made available as part of the Quarter 3 performance report in the New Year.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report and the feedback from the four services scrutiny committees.

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

The Service Director, Legal & Democratic Services reported on the need to consider how the minutes of the Fframwaith Partnership Board should be reported to scrutiny and he provided the background to the current arrangements. It was explained that as a result of a query which had been left unanswered at the last meeting of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee concerns had been raised in respect of the current process and the Chairman welcomed Members' thoughts on the matter. The Chairs of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee and Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee both agreed that it might be better if the Fframwaith minutes were reported to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee rather than the two service scrutiny committees. However, it was pointed out by a Member who had been part of the original Fframwaith scrutiny working group that as it was the intention of the Working Group that the minutes should go to both the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee and the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee that these Committees should have the opportunity to consider the matter.

Following the discussion, the Director of Financial Services responded to the query which had been raised at the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee in relation to the minutes of the Fframwaith meeting held on 27th September 2013. A Member queried the comment made by the Director of Financial Services whereby he questioned whether there would be a need for a Fframwaith Partnership in the future.

The Director of Financial Services explained that the comment had been taken out of context. He explained that the agenda item was 'Fframwaith's Champion and Challenge Role' and he had been reporting on the three themes and the corresponding three partnership structures which underpin the Single Integrated Plan. The Director of Financial Services explained that during the discussion he had been simply throwing down the challenge to the Fframwaith Partnership in terms of how they could fit into the new arrangements and make a difference.

RESOLVED that a report be presented to both the Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee and the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee in consideration of whether the minutes of the Fframwaith Partnership Board meetings should be presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee rather than the two service scrutiny committees.

21. URGENT ITEM.

The Chairman reported that he had received a request that morning from the Chairman of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee for an update in relation to the flooding incident which had occurred in Treorchy during the weekend. He informed the Committee that the Group Director, Environmental Services had prepared a statement and this was read out by the Chairman.

"At 18.42 on the 14/12 /13 'highways' received several flooding calls from our call centre including some from High Street Treorchy. Highways were already dealing with earlier issues but due to the nature and urgency of the situation we diverted to the above address.

On arrival at the location the highway inspector reported back that there was already water entering several properties and there was a large amount of standing water in the carriageway. Mr Glen Fortt (Highways Manager) instructed the highway inspector to get sand bags to site to see if we could prevent further flooding, which he did.

Investigations then started to find the cause of the problem, Mr Glen Fortt requested a second inspector to join the one already on site to try to resolve the problem.

It soon became apparent that local residents were pointing them in the direction of the Welsh Water pumping station as being the cause. At this stage Welsh Water had been contacted by one of our inspectors and had arrived on site. Works were undertaken to the pumps at the pumping station which quickly resolved the flooding at the location.

The highway inspectors stayed on site at the location until 22.30 helping residents sweep out water, move furniture and deliver sand bags, we also supplied transport to one resident who did not want to stay at his property.

Whilst all of this was ongoing Mr Glen Fortt was in constant communication with our Emergency planning officer. Arrangements were made to make ready Ystrad sport centre, in case residents needed accommodation over night. This was stood down by the police after door to door enquiries' established no residents wanted to leave their properties. Inspectors then reported that Welsh Water had taken over the situation and were knocking on doors to reassure residents as such Mr Glen Fortt (Highways Manager) stood the two highway inspectors down.

The following morning Mr Glen Fortt asked the inspector to visit this site once again in day light to see if the Authority could provide any further assistance in clearing up or supplying sand bags etc. At this time the inspector also checked that there were no further drainage problems in and around the area. The site was clear."

The Chairman reported that he intended to send his thanks to the Group Director for the work undertaken by his staff and in conclusion the Chairman of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee requested that Welsh Water be invited to attend a meeting of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED: to note the information provided.

R K Turner
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.10 pm.