

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY, 18<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2013**

**ITEM 3 - GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION FOR 2014/15**

**FEEDBACK FROM THE 4 SERVICE SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

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## **Feedback**

### **Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee –2<sup>nd</sup> December 2013**

#### **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.

## **Feedback**

### **Community and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee –4<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

#### **1. Service & Improvement Priorities**

A Member commented that it was important to appreciate that the priority 'A Quality Education for All' was not just the responsibility of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee but was a cross cutting theme and of particular importance in relation to children in care.

Another Member commented that the priority area 'Delivering within our means' was of key importance in the current climate.

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

A Member questioned whether the Welsh Government was aware that the current level of funding made the provision of services unsustainable

The Director of Financial Services informed the Committee that the Welsh Government funding given to the Council was formula based. Of particular concern to the Council was the need to be able to plan over a 2 – 3 year period. In response to a query he indicated that he was not aware of the level of Welsh Government general reserves.

A Member commented that as a result of the Welsh Government's budget being cut they had less to share out. However, she feared that in the next few years there would be nothing left to cut.

A Member suggested that there was a lack of proper dialogue with the public sector to establish budget requirements.

A Member asked whether it was likely that the final settlement for Rhondda Cynon Taf would be an improvement on the provisional figures.

The Director of Financial Services indicated we needed to await news of the final settlement, although he had not seen a great deal of difference between the provisional figures and the final settlement figures in the past.

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

A Member queried the percentage of households that paid Council Tax and was informed that approximately 30% received some benefit relief. However, within this figure approximately two thirds paid nothing.

A Member pointed out that given the number of households that paid Council Tax and the low rateable value of the majority of the housing stock, an increase in Council Tax did not generate much revenue and was counter-productive if it led to an increase in arrears and collection costs.

A member suggested that there was a need to consider what the market could bare and felt that anything above 3 -3.5% would place families under too much pressure.

#### **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 commented that he would support the current arrangements continuing.

One Member commented that in his opinion any extended payments and backdating payments should stop.

However, a Member countered this argument by pointing out that this would result in arrears building up and cause more problems in the future. She also pointed out that some people had difficulty understanding the forms and needed assistance in completing them. These comments were also supported by another Member.

#### **6. Any other Comments?**

A Member raised concerns regarding public access to the Budget Consultation pointing out that the use of on-line only processes excluded many from contributing. Whilst there may have been paper copies of the consultation document available he questioned whether the public would have been aware of this.

A Member agreed with this comment pointing out that if Members themselves had been provided with a paper copy they could have made their constituents aware through their work with community groups.

## **Feedback**

### **Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee –9<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

#### **1. Service & Improvement Priorities**

One Member of the Committee commented that although all the priorities listed were reasonable, he queried whether the Authority would be forced to do something more radical due to the current financial climate. The Director, Financial Services commented that the priorities set out the overall strategic direction and these needed to be delivered whilst living within available means.

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

One Member commented on the problem with illustrating figures through percentages in relation to the settlements received over the past years rather than actual pounds. The Director, Financial Services advised that he did not have the exact pound figures available for each year, but clearly, 2014/15 was likely to be only the second year ever the Council has seen a reduction in available funding.

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

One Member commented that the question was impossible to answer, especially with the outcome of the phase one service cuts consultation being unknown.

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

One Member commented that they felt the backdating of claims for 3 months was a little excessive and felt that this figure should be halved.

The 4 week extended payment for individuals returning to work was felt by Committee Members to be a reasonable period.

#### **5. Any other Comments?**

Following a query the Director, Financial Services confirmed that the process for the general budget consultation involved consulting

with Scrutiny Committees, the School Budget forum and the public via online and hard copy questionnaires.



## Feedback

### Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee – 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013

#### **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.

**7. Any other Comments?**

There were no further comments.

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY, 18<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2013**

**ITEM 4 – QUARTER 2 EXCEPTION REPORT**

**APPENDIX 5 - FEEDBACK FROM THE 4 SERVICE SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

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## **Feedback**

### **Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee –2<sup>nd</sup> December 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.





## **Feedback**

### **Community and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee –4<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

With regard to the Disabled Facilities Grant a Member asked whether the Council provided the contractor. It was explained that a preferred list was used that had been subject to tender under the Council Contact Procedures rule..

A Member welcomed the positive sickness absence trend.

A Member questioned the criteria for Flying Start pointing out the difficulties of the current system which was dependent on families living within an eligible area rather than need. This was causing conflict in some communities when for example families living at one end of a street might be eligible but those living a short distance away were not because they had a different post code.

The Group Director, Community & Children's Services informed the Committee that he was aware that the current procedure was causing a problem in some communities but that the operation of Flying Start was determined by the Welsh Government and traditionally there had been very little room for flexibility. He explained that he would look into the matter to see if anything could be done but did not wish to raise expectations.

A Member referred to an arrangement with the independent sector to develop the residential capacity within the county borough for children and the Service Director, Children's Services explained that this provision, if taken forward, would allow those who wished to remain within Rhondda Cynon Taf the opportunity to do so. This had a number of benefits, namely, it made it easier for the children to remain in contact with their family if appropriate and also reduced the on-costs to the Council.

A Member referred to the very large increase in the number of referrals received by Children's Services and asked whether a reason had been identified, possibly as a result of Welfare Reform. The Service Director, Children's Services explained that it was very difficult to know precisely what was causing the rise and that the reasons for family breakdown were often complex. The Group Director added that poverty did generate additional pressures for families and pointed out that the full impact of Welfare Reform was still to come. He explained that a big challenge for the Council was the number of large sibling groups in the area.

A Member stressed the importance of the link with Education and commented that in her experience if the elder siblings attended school

the young children would also engage. The Service Director, Children's Services confirmed that the service worked closely with the Education Service and attendance was monitored. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing also pointed to the Team Around the Family (TAF) programme which was based on early intervention with families provided with support outside of the statutory provisions.

## **Feedback**

### **Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee –9<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

One Member of the Committee queried the measures put in place to engage with young people who leave compulsory education without qualifications. The Service Director, Schools and Community advised the Committee of the number of measures in place, advising in particular of the vulnerability profiling within secondary schools and the interventions put in place resulting from the profiling. The Service Director was asked when the vulnerability profiling commenced and the Head of Engagement & Participation advised of the pilot commenced with key stage 4 learners with the intention of being eventually rolled down to primary learners, to assist with transition planning. One Member questioned further the factors taking into consideration with the vulnerability profiling and requested examples of such interventions. The Service Director advised that with regards to the profiling factors indicators such as social economic factors (free school meals), listing on child protection / child in need registers, attendance levels, SEN, involvement in MARAC (multi agency risk assessment conferences) and youth offending activities are all taken into consideration. The Service Director advised that it was difficult to provide examples of such intervention as each was a bespoke package depending on each child's circumstances. Some examples would include additional support in literacy / numeracy, transition workers, more intensive engagement with parents/carers.

The Head of Community Learning provided the Committee with details on the Library outreach activities referred to within the Health check report. Members were advised of the various activities undertaken outside libraries, such as librarian visits to schools, family history talks and Council events, such as the open day events.

One Committee Member referred to the Behaviour Strategy within the Q2 exception report and queried whether this was still in draft form. The Service Director, Schools and Community confirmed that the strategy was still in draft form due to the need for consultations with schools and the undertaking of an audit into the current best working practices, which would assist in finalising the strategy.

Committee Members commented upon the sickness absence figures for the service and queried whether staff who were advised to refrain from work due to sickness bugs etc were still recorded as sickness or whether this was now being recorded as medical suspensions. The Service Director confirmed that discussions had taken place with HR colleagues and Trade Union representatives on the issue and confirmed that currently this was still being recorded as sickness. The

Officer commented on the potential need to change policy documents if this was to be reported differently in the future. The Committees Trade Union representatives provided further information on the issue, confirming that this was not an issue just for Education but was cross cutting, commenting on those employees working with vulnerable adults etc and commented that this would need to be looked at across the Board.

Members sought clarity on the Occupational Health statistics querying firstly the 248 Counselling statistics and whether this was due to work related stress issues and also the 18 appointments with technicians. Officers advised that the latter referred to work place assessments and the Service Director, Schools and Community agreed to seek clarity on the Counselling referrals.

One Member commented on the positive news in relation to secondary school attendance figures but queried why 3 out of the 19 secondary schools had not improved and the actions in place to address these issues. The Head of Engagement & Participation advised the Committee of the data gathering exercises undertaken on a 6 weekly cycle which assisted with identifying school attendance and the Committee were advised that if it was identified that schools were not performing then programme data response visits were undertaken. The Committee Member further queried whether attendance figures dropped during the last years of school to which the officer confirmed that this was generally the case, although spoke of the early interventions put in place to try to re-engage with pupils.

The national initiative of Professional Learning Communities was queried by Members in respect of the development of cohesive approaches in literacy and numeracy and it was queried why this was now the responsibility of the schools rather than the Authority. The Service Director, Schools and Community advised that the funding for such activities was now in the main delegated directly to schools through grant funding, therefore minimising the need for Authority involvement.

The Service Director, Community and Schools was queried as to the envisaged benefits from the new on line school admissions service and the provision of the Hwb, virtual Learning Environment which had missed its target was also queried. The Service Director advised of both the environmental benefits of using an online schools admission service as well as the streamlining of the process for both the Authority and for parents and carers. With regards to Hwb, the Committee were advised that this was the all Wales Learning platform supported by the Welsh Government which was to support the national action to encourage, support and prepare teachers to share digital practices and curriculum resources. The Service Director confirmed that the roll out of training to schools to enable access to Hwb is still on track but the content within the platform itself still requires further development.

Officers were questioned on the measures in place to drive up standards in both early years settings and schools to improve the outcomes for all children and the Service Director confirmed that this was measured through the foundation phase outcomes, which could be provided to Members.

The three year financial plans for schools was also queried and the Service Director advised that currently only one school was in a budget deficit and that the Director, Education & Lifelong Learning had written a warning letter to the school and commented that recovery plans were necessary for deficit budget. The Member queried how robust the recovery plans could be in-light of the current service cut consultations and the Director of Finance commented that production of recovery plans needed to be put in place although commented on the potential difficulties with the robustness of the plans due to Welsh Government not providing 3 year financial projections.

One Member commented on the analysis of data in relation to 3 out of 19 primary clusters underperforming in relation % of primary pupils with a standardised score of 95 or more in mathematics test. The Member queried the number of schools this related to and the Service Director, advised that she was unable to give specific figures as the number of schools within each cluster varied. The Officer was queried further as to whether this underperformance related to pupil difficulties or teaching styles and the Service Director confirmed that there was a general weakness in relation to numeracy, and referenced the recent PISA test results where Wales were ranked as 43<sup>rd</sup> in Maths out of 65 Countries. The Officer confirmed that a lot of work had been undertaken in relation to up-skilling of school staff within the subject area, with different teaching modules being piloted.

One Member requested detail on the 'Your Futures First' project referenced within the report and the Head of Engagement & Participation advised that this was a 12 week pre-engagement project run alongside Careers Wales and Canopi and agreed to provide further information to the Committee on the project.

Further clarity was raised in respect of the review undertaken in relation to non formal and informal educational interventions funded through Fframwaith and the Service Director, Community and Schools agreed to provide further clarity on the review to Members at a future date.

The final query on the Q2 Exception report related to the critical improvement action in relation to the removal of an estimated 1,250 surplus school places and a Member of the Committee queried whether the figures for the proposed closure of Pentre Primary school was contained within this figure. Officers agreed to seek clarity on the figure and advise Members accordingly.



## **Feedback**

### **Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee – 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

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 13<sup>th</sup> 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.