

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, 17th December 2014 at 5 pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor R K Turner – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

H Boggis	(Mrs) J Cass	G R Davies
(Mrs) M E Davies	P Griffiths	(Mrs) C Leyshon
(Mrs) S Rees	R W Smith	G Thomas
(Mrs) J S Ward	P Wasley	C Willis

Officers in Attendance:

Mr P J Lucas – Director of Legal & Democratic Services
Mr B Davies – Director of Financial Services
Ms A Edwards – Scrutiny Support Officer

21. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors S Bradwick, P Jarman, M A Norris and C J Williams.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED to note that in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, there were no declarations of interest made at this juncture. However, a declaration was made later in the meeting (Minute No. 25).

23. MINUTES

RESOLVED: to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 15th October 2014.

With reference to Minute 18 – Wales Audit Office Annual Improvement Report Members commented on the need for continued scrutiny focus on the issues identified as in need of improvement. The Chairman of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee reported that he had met with the Director of Highways & Streetcare Services and the Cabinet Portfolio Holder with regard to recycling performance and had been assured that performance would improve.

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, CORPORATE SERVICES

24. GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION

Members considered the feedback from the four service scrutiny committees and for the benefit of those members that had not already received the presentation in relation to the budget consultation, the Director of Financial Services provided the Committee with a brief overview of the consultation process which had considered the provisional settlement for 2015/16, the budget gap, service improvement priorities, Council Tax levels and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. It was reported that the final settlement was published on the 10th December 2014 with no significant change to the provisional settlement.

Members were asked whether they wished to add their comments to those already received from the service scrutiny committees and which would be used to assist Cabinet in its deliberations before preparing a draft budget strategy which would be consulted upon as part of the Stage 2 consultation process and before making its recommendations to Council.

A Member reiterated points he had made at the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee explaining that the best that could be hoped for was a 4-5% increase in Council Tax pointing out, however, that no authority would wish to be the one imposing the largest Council Tax increase in Wales. He also commented that the use of reserves to bridge the budget gap did nothing to address the real financial situation but only served to delay the inevitable.

Another Member also wished to draw attention to comments which he had made at the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee highlighting his concern in relation to the current budget and service change consultations and suggesting that the process should be combined. He emphasised his view that if the Council is to protect Education and services to vulnerable adults and children, there will be insufficient funds to deliver on the remaining priorities. This view was endorsed by other Members who also queried whether the public fully understood the position when being asked for their views in relation to Council Tax. The Director of Financial Services explained that participants were provided with a level of context to help their understanding in relation to the Council Tax options. The Committee stressed the need to ensure that the public were fully informed in relation to how local government is funded and the relatively small proportion which is generated through Council Tax.

Another Member also referred to a point he had previously made in relation to the priority 'making the best use of our budget' and commented on how difficult it would be to convince the public that this was being done.

In response to a query to the Director of Financial Services confirmed that the figures set out in the pie chart depicting spend for 2014/15 were the 'net' figures.

Members were in agreement that the current discretions in relation to the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme should remain.

In conclusion, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee **RESOLVED** that the feedback from the 4 service scrutiny committees along with the additional comments of the Committee be provided to the Cabinet in respect of the General Budget Consultation process.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

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

(**Note:** The following declaration of personal and non prejudicial interest was received in relation to this agenda item:

County Borough Councillor G R Davies – Agenda Item 4 - ‘Outcome Agreement’ – “Landlord and Provider of Misuse of Substances Services”.)

The Committee was provided with the Performance Exception Reports for Quarter 2 which had been considered by each of the individual service scrutiny committees. The Committee was circulated with the feedback on the discussion points raised at these meetings. The report also included an overview of the Council’s position as a whole including a Council Health Check which provided a snapshot of the Authority’s second quarter performance. Also attached was the Wales Programme for Improvement Plan within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee namely, ‘Making the best use of our budget’ and the progress against the Outcome Agreement measures.

The Chairman invited comments from the chairs and vice chairs of the service scrutiny committees.

The Chair of the Community & Children’s Services Scrutiny Committee drew attention to her Committee’s concern in relation to the rise in sickness absence within the Group and the Vice Chairman also reported that she had asked for reassurance that an improvement in performance would be seen in relation to some of the long standing issues within Children’s Services.

The Chair of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee commented that she was pleased to see the improved school attendance figures.

The Chair of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee asked for clarity in relation to the pie charts depicting performance. The Director of Financial Services explained that there were 218 performance indicators across the Council and these were set out either within the WPI Action Plans at Appendix 3 or additional data tables within the Council Performance Report presented to the Cabinet Performance and Resources Committee on 20th November 2014. However, he pointed out that performance measures that were not

classified as either national or local performance indicators were not included within the pie charts.

The Scrutiny Performance Co-ordinator referred to the need to re-consider the current scrutiny framework given the recent changes to the Council's Management structure.

A Member cautioned that any move toward a more themed based cross cutting approach should not prevent Members challenging individual departments.

The Chairman drew Members' attention to the 'Making best use of our budget' action plan and invited questions.

The Director of Financial Services clarified the position with regard to External Funding explaining that an officer working group had been formed which included the Director of Regeneration & Planning and himself to develop a better management protocol for use across the Council. He explained that external funding would only be pursued for projects which it could demonstrate a real benefit to the Council.

The Chairman referred to page 44 of the report and the two missed targets me01 and me02 in relation to contract management and the training of procurement officers. The Director of Financial Services explained that there had been some slippage with regard to the roll out of training which was being provided free of charge from an external source. However, it was expected to be back on track by Quarter 3.

The Chairman also referred to page 45, CA03 and asked whether the development of a new sickness absence policy was on target. The Director of Financial Services reported that there had been a slight slippage which would be reported at Quarter 3 as a result of changes made by the DWP in its national recording and which had impacted on progress in relation to the maximising attendance strategy. The Chairman asked whether it would be possible to receive information in relation to the cost of agency staff to fill sickness absence pointing out that this could be used as a measure which would help gauge the impact of any new sickness policy.

A Member referred to the preparation of the Revenue Budget Strategy for 2015/16 and the public consultation process alongside the consultations in relation to service change proposals and commented on the current degree of uncertainty upon which to base the strategy.

The Director of Financial Services agreed that there were uncertainties but pointed out that to some degree these could be factored for. He pointed to the financial benefits accrued as a result of the service change programme to date and the option of using of reserves during the transition period which would enable the Council to produce a balanced budget.

A Member questioned the position across the Council with regard to Maternity absence pointing out that schools pay an insurance premium to protect themselves against the costs of staff cover. The Director of Financial Services explained that schools operated differently to the Council as a whole and that the cost of maternity absences had to be funded from existing budgets. The Member asked if the Committee could be provided with the detail of these costs.

A Member questioned whether the Authority could get a better return on its investments by moving money around banks in the same way as the general public are encouraged to do. The Director of Financial Services explained that the Council was not able to invest in high street banks. He explained that the Council adopted a low risk Treasury Management strategy with regard to its investments and as a result the interest rate levels were low.

A Member referred to the Outcome Agreement Measure '% of apprentices achieving the apprenticeship framework criteria'. He asked whether those that had not achieved the framework criteria had failed to as a result of ability or whether it was down to disinterest. Another Member commented that based on his past experience, the drop off rate was actually very low. A Member questioned the wisdom of adopting a 100% target when invariably there would be some drop out from an apprenticeship scheme.

The Director of Financial Services reminded the Committee that whilst there were a number of Outcome Agreements measures showing as red, this was an early warning system and Members could be reassured that every effort was being made to ensure that the Council attracted the maximum level of funding.

A Member asked whether more information could be obtained with regard to the decision by South Wales Police not to progress the Integrated Offender Management ISP at this time.

A Member questioned the delay in presenting the Strategic Risk Register to the Audit Committee. The Director of Financial Services reported that this had now been reported to the October meeting of the Audit Committee. However, he pointed out that these risks were already included within the action plans reported both to Cabinet and Scrutiny. A Member requested that the Risk Management Toolkit be circulated to all Members for information.

In conclusion, the Chairman reminded the Committee of the Corporate Plan which had been agreed by Council in June and the role of scrutiny in helping to deliver on these commitments. He explained that as such, it was crucial that scrutiny rigorously challenged performance at Quarter 3.

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

R K Turner
Chairman

The meeting closed at 6.20 pm.