

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Education and Lifelong Learning Services Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Clydach Vale on Wednesday, 28th January 2015 at 5pm.

Present:

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) C Leyshon – in the Chair

County Borough Councillors:

L. M. Adams	(Mrs) S. J. Jones
(Mrs) J. Bunnage	B. Morgan
(Mrs) A. Calvert	G. Smith
J. Elliott	B. Stephens
S. Evans-Fear	G. Thomas
M. Griffiths	L. Walker
P. Jarman	C. Williams

Co-Opted Members:-

Mr J Horton – Parent Governor
Mr J Fish – Parent Governor
Mr D Price - Unison

Officers in Attendance:

Ms E Thomas – Service Director for Schools and Community
Ms S Walker – Head of Achievement, Primary & Senior Challenge Advisor
Mr B Davies – Director, Financial Services
Mr P Nicholls – Principal Solicitor, Litigation

55 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from County Borough Councillors A. L. Davies (MBE) and R. Lewis.

56 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following declaration of interest was received from County Borough Councillor P. Jarman in relation to Agenda Item 3, General Budget Consultation Process (Stage 2) – ‘On the 4th November 2014, following a request I made to the Standards Committee. I was granted a dispensation in my capacity as Leader of the Opposition to speak and vote at meetings of the Council and the Overview & Scrutiny Committees on matters relating to all services affected by the budget process for a period leading up to and including the formal approval of the budget for 2015/16 by the Council.’ – Prejudicial interest – ‘I have a son working for the Council and he lives with me’

57 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED to approve as an accurate record the Minutes of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee of the 3rd December 2014 and of the 11th December 2014.

58 **GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION**

The Director of Financial Services provided Members with a presentation in respect of the General Budget Consultation Process advising of stage one consultation feedback which involved a number of engagement events where views were sought on Council priorities, council tax levels, council tax reduction scheme and budget saving ideas. A summary of the Stage 1 consultation feedback which took place during the period 10th November to 16th December 2014 was provided and included responses such as the preferred level of council tax, suggestions for further priorities and income generation ideas.

The Director of Financial Services outlined the timetable for Stage 2 of the general budget consultation process which will culminate in a review of feedback on the draft budget strategy by Cabinet mid February 2015. Members were reminded of the key headlines relating to the Welsh Government's final settlement which had been announced on the 10th December 2014 and of the Council's actions taken to date such as phase 2 and Leisure Services changes plus base budget requirement adjustments, including the senior management structure, expressions of interest exercise and changes in customer care. Attention was also drawn to the initial budget gap for 2015/16 and the key elements of the proposed strategy for 2015/16, subject to Cabinet approval, were reported.

The Director of Financial Services explained the Medium term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve which has successfully supported transitional funding as part of the Council's Medium term Service Planning arrangements. In conclusion Members of the Committee were informed of the proposed budget allocation to services and of the latest projected budget gap to 2017/18 (subject to Cabinet approval of the 2015/16 strategy).

Following the presentation Members were invited to ask questions of the Director of Financial Services before providing their views on the specific points on the strategy elements, treatment of schools, efficiency requirements, medium term financial planning and the proposed level of council tax as well as the consultation process in general.

RESOLVED: that the view of the Education & Lifelong Learning Services Scrutiny Committee be passed to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in consideration of the Council's General Budget Strategy Consultation Exercise, as follows:

1. **Is the uplift proposed for schools reasonable?**

One Member commented that it is difficult to agree and that he was 'stuck between two stones'

Another member said it is difficult to comment without knowing the detail of the Education Improvement Grant but added that schools are under more pressure this year and questioned whether they are using the grant effectively?

2. Is the efficiency expectation reasonable? Are there any specific areas / ideas / ways that efficiency actions could be delivered?

One Member asked how many of the efficiency expectations are realistically achievable? The Director of Financial Services confirmed that the £5M of general efficiency is supported by detailed and robust plans and that the expressions of interest and senior management re structure reflect the financial implications of decisions already made.

A member of the committee described the graph as 'catastrophic' which requires drastic action and felt that this should be driving the budget review?

One Member described the discretionary element of the budget as not straightforward and an area on which the council will have to focus in order to balance the budget and reduce the £16M shortfall.

Another Member commented that it is right and proper that the Council give due regard to staff and the community when considering cuts to services and that working with the Trade Unions helps the Council in this regard.

3. Budget Strategy - Do you agree with the other elements of the budget strategy?

A comment was made in relation to those 'green' businesses avoiding added charges and how they should be rewarded more.

A question was asked of the Director of Financial Services with regard to capital receipts was and the Director explained that capital receipts can only be used to support capital expenditure.

Clarification was requested on the revenue savings as a result of reducing the capital programme and the Director outlined that revenue budgets are currently in place to fund capital expenditure and that these could be released.

A member of the committee asked whether there was a danger of pricing ourselves out of the market with other providers stepping in following the proposal to increase Trade Waste Charges. The Director of Financial Services commented that trade waste continue to benefit the Council as residual waste counts against our recycling activities and would have a positive impact on our recycling targets.

A member of the committee asked whether we could see increased avoidance of the scheme by some if the trade waste charges were increased too much. The Director of Financial Services commented that greater enforcement activities may be required if necessary. It was added that other elements of the review

include opportunities for trade waste being collected in the evenings to avoid peak time collections for example in town centres.

4. What are your views on the use of the Transition Funding?

A member commented that we have no option in this case.

Another member agreed that we have no choice but to use the transitional funding and if we can't remodel our services we have to use the funding.

A comment was made that all other avenues have been explored rather than looking at using the transitional funding.

An observation was made that 'if you're skint, you use your savings'.

A question was raised in respect of whether the Community Infrastructure Levy had been factored in to the revenue budget for next year? It was confirmed that there was no income currently included in this regard.

A member described the budget as being high level but added that the legal challenges faced by the Council have caused delays to decisions and cost money and that is the real reason why it is at this level. Some people will be wondering if they'll have a job on the 1st April 2015.

A further query was raised in respect of the origin of the reserve and the Director of Financial Services responded that the medium term financial planning and service transformation reserve (transition funding) has been in place for a number of years and was funded as a consequence of being able to reallocate funding as part of the annual review of earmarked reserves (for example from funds originally set aside for job evaluation and equal pay liabilities).

5. What are your views on the proposed increase in Council Tax

One Member asked how the proposed Council Tax increase compares with other Local Authorities and the Director of Financial Services responded that based on early indications RCT would be in the bottom quartile for Council Tax increases.

One member described the council tax level as reasonable in the current climate but added that its a shame that the SWP Authority don't share the same view as with their 5% precept which is considered by many as unreasonable especially in view of the fact that South Wales Fire Service have taken a reduction.

Another member agreed with the earlier comment and added that South Wales Police should be invited to Committee to explain the reasons for setting their precept at 5%

Another member queried the comments of the Director of Financial Services from the minutes of the previous meeting of the Education & Lifelong Learning Services Scrutiny Committee in respect of the level of Council Tax base growth

which was factored in to the budget. The Director of Financial Services confirmed that a level of tax base growth had been factored in and that a Council Tax increase was previously modelled at 3.5%.

REPORTS OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING

59 ESTYN INSPECTION REPORT OUTCOMES IN RCT SCHOOLS IN AUTUMN TERM 2014

The Head of Achievement, Primary provided the Committee with a detailed analysis of the Estyn Inspection report outcomes during the Autumn Term 2014.

Members were advised that during Autumn 2014 2 non maintained settings, 7 primary schools, 2 secondary schools and 1 special school received an Estyn inspection with a further 6 primary schools and 1 secondary school having been subject to follow up activities. The Head of Achievement, Primary explained the added column in the follow-up activities under the heading 'Activities undertaken by CSC/LA to support improvements' for the benefit of Members.

The Officer proceeded to provide outcomes for each of the schools outlining which schools had been considered to be in need of Estyn monitoring. Committee was advised that four schools within the County Borough had been identified as demonstrating excellent practice and it was agreed by members of the Committee that a letter acknowledging this achievement is sent to them.

Members of the Committee discussed the merits of the Estyn inspections and demonstrated their disappointment at some of the findings relating to schools within the County Borough that may have come close to reaching their required targets. Members of the Committee addressed the issue of categorisation and asked whether this committee would have sight of the categories in order to monitor progress. In response the Head of Achievement, Primary confirmed that following publication of the National School Categorisation System the information is available via 'My School Website' and will be presented to both the Council's Cabinet and Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee.

The work of the Central South Consortium and in particular the valuable role of the Challenge Advisers in schools that are subject to follow-up was outlined as well as their role in addressing issues such as numeracy levels in Welsh schools. Members expressed their concern at the comments included in the report by Estyn Inspectors regarding pupil attendance and how non attendance by a minority particularly in the smaller Primary schools can impact on overall levels of performance. The Head of Achievement, Primary responded that all the recommendations have to be and are reported against including attendance.

In conclusion the Head of Achievement, Primary reported that despite the continued high number of schools placed in follow up activity, the lighter follow up activity which is local authority monitoring has increased this term demonstrating improvements in the positive leadership in schools across the County Borough. The officer outlined the steps that needed to be addressed to improve the current levels of performance.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to note the report.

60 FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER (FAST)

The Service Director for Schools and Community presented a report in respect of the implementation and delivery of the Save the Children, 'Families and Schools Together' (FAST) programme in schools and communities across the County Borough.

The Service Director outlined the background to the award winning initiative and how the early intervention programme has been brought into schools across Rhondda Cynon Taf through corporate sponsorship and successful partnership, working in those schools situated mainly in Communities First areas. It was reported that the programme relies heavily on the time and commitment of the individual head teacher together with the cooperation and joint partnership of many organisations such as Communities First, Early Years and Family Support Service including Flying Start, Play Service and the Family Information Service as well as teachers, teaching assistants, school cooks and nurses.

Details were provided as to how the initiative works within the school extending over an 8 week period and designed to improve children's outcomes and wellbeing by involving family members and children in a range of activities to improve family play, communication and one to one parent- child dedicated support.

By means of a table Committee were able to see which schools have participated in the programme within Rhondda Cynon Taf, the numbers of children and families who have engaged in the initiative and their retention levels which remain high. It was confirmed that performance data is being undertaken to measure the impact of the programme on school attendance levels and on levels of attainment which will need to be measured over a longer timescale to properly appreciate the outcomes.

Members commented on the success of the programme on a local level and considered it a highly commendable project. It was agreed that the initiative was valuable by bringing schools, parents, children and the wider community together and it was considered that it should be a priority and rolled out to many other schools however they were mindful of the initial costs involved to train the staff. A discussion ensued regarding the way forward for the programme and whether the delivery partners, Communities First, could provide a basis for the scheme. It was reported that several options are currently being explored in order to maintain the momentum of the scheme and possibly cascade the training.

A Member queried the selection process for allocating the schools to the programme as some schools highlighted in the table are not in a Communities First area. The Service Director for Schools and Community explained that the selection process is based on a number of factors to determine the most appropriate schools including the willingness and commitment of the providers

themselves and added that the programme is available to any school which wants to participate. Committee was informed that Estyn have also recognised and identified the scheme in schools across the County Borough.

The Service Director for Schools and Community concluded her report by advising that a further update in respect of the FAST programme would be brought back before committee in the future.

It was **RESOLVED** to note the information contained within this report.

The meeting closed at 6.40 pm

(Mrs) C Leyshon
Chairman

Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next appropriate meeting of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee