

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY, 17<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2014**

**ITEM 3 - GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION FOR 2015/16**

**FEEDBACK FROM THE 4 SERVICE SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

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**ITEM 4 – QUARTER 2 EXCEPTION REPORT**

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## **Feedback**

### **Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee 1<sup>st</sup> December 2014**

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

Members of the Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee agreed that focus should continue to be on the seven improvement priority areas as set out for 2014-15 and felt these priorities should not be changed for the forthcoming year.

#### **2. Budget Consultation 2015-16 -What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2015-16?**

Members commented that the position was “grim” and asked for clarification on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme which the Director of Financial Services duly provided. Members were in agreement that the CTRS was a sensible scheme which will assist many residents.

One Member referred to the 1% increase in Council tax costing £0.235m in additional CTRS and asked whether the ratio is likely to change for the following year. The Director of Financial Services explained that there are currently no plans to change the national scheme and confirmed that all Local Authorities are adopt the national scheme, with local discretions. Discussions centred on the impact of more people requiring CTRS support in the future.

#### **3. Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

Members were content that the four week period of Council Tax Reduction was a reasonable period for those going back to work and were satisfied that the council continues to totally disregard the War Disablement Pensions/War Widows Pensions Income and with the discretion with regard to backdating.

#### **4. Any Other Comments?**

One member of the Committee queried whether other forums and groups should be identified and included in the consultation process. The Director of Financial Services confirmed that the process is refined each year and this year has seen the general budget consultation process opened up to more groups and forums and extended in duration as compared to last year. Another Member commented on the school councils which had been invited to join the consultation process.



## **Feedback**

### **Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee –3<sup>rd</sup> December 2014**

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

A Member commented that he hoped that Children's Services would be prioritised.

A Member suggested that there was a disconnect in that if Adult and Children's Care Services and Education are afforded any protection, given their sizeable portion of the available budget a decline in the other service areas would be unavoidable. He questioned whether there was a need for a more honest approach in dealing with the harsh reality of the budget situation.

The Chairman commented that in an ideal world those listed priorities were reasonable but the three main priorities had to be Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education.

A Member voiced his concern that the Council was in danger raising expectations without the finance to deliver.

The Director of Financial Services explained that the seven priorities all have detailed action plans sitting below, the detail of which would have regard to resources available.

#### **2. Budget Consultation 2015/16 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2014/15?**

A Member explained that whilst last year he was of the opinion that Council Tax levels should rise to help retain services, his view had now changed and he hoped that a rise in Council Tax would be kept to a reasonable level. He felt that the public would be disillusioned with another large rise in Council Tax when services were being cut.

A Member commented that if people wanted to keep services they would have to pay.

A Member pointed out that he was meeting people in his community every day who were commenting that they had not received a pay rise for 3,4 or even 5 years and yet the level of Council Tax was increasing year on year. They also argue that in England the rate has been frozen. He explained that whilst in the past he had been able to argue that Council Tax levels in Wales were 20% lower than in England he was not sure if this was still the case given that they had now had a 3 year Council Tax freeze. He commented that he would like to see a comparison undertaken on equal properties and if rates were now

higher in Rhondda Cynon Taf it would be difficult to justify further increases.

A Member pointed to the potential complications should there be local authority mergers with regard to different levels of Council Tax.

A Member commented that in his opinion, any rise had to be below 5%.

A Member pointed out that any rise in the police precept would be an additional burden for residents.

3. **Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme – Views on the Council’s Discretionary decisions that may be added to the National Council Tax Reduction Scheme.**

Members were in agreement that the current discretions should remain.

4. **Any other Comments?**

There were no further comments.

## **Feedback**

### **Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee –11<sup>th</sup> December 2014**

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

One Member of the Committee commented that although all the priorities listed were plausible, he queried whether the Authority would be forced to do something more radical due to the current financial climate.

One Member commented that the surplus places in schools were a further drain on resources.

Members were satisfied with the seven priority areas for 2014/15.

#### **2. Budget Consultation 2015/16 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2015/16?**

Some Members felt that an increase in Council Tax would clearly not bridge the budget gap and nor would it save services and they considered that services would need to be cut, some completely.

One Member commented that 1% equates to £900,000 (excluding CTRS impact) based on existing housing stock and queried the impact of increased housing development taking place across the County Borough. The Director of Financial Services confirmed that an element of growth to the tax base had been factored in to the budget.

Members agreed that the Council should raise the Council Tax in order to maintain as many services as possible.

#### **3 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 the extended payments for a further four weeks after returning to work was sensible considering that most people are paid monthly, enabling some 'catch up' time.

All Members were satisfied with the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS)

#### **4 Any other Comments?**

There were no additional comments to report.





## **Feedback**

### **Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2014**

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

A Member agreed that the seven listed priorities were the right priorities to focus on and added that he would like to see more if it were not for the financial situation of the Council.

A Member agreed with this statement but expressed his concerns that the last priority, 'making best use of our budget' would be the most difficult in terms of convincing the public that the right approach was being taken.

#### **2. Budget Consultation 2015/16 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2014/15?**

A Member commented that the Council would be criticised whatever the level of increase decided upon.

Another Member felt that it needed to be pitched at an affordable level pointing out that Council staff had received a 1% pay rise. He also pointed out that increasing the Council Tax level too much would increase the number of defaulters. He suggested that a rise between 3.5% - 4% would be the most that would be accepted.

A Member asked whether there was any information available on the levels being set by other authorities. The Director of Financial Services reported that this information was not available at this stage.

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

Members were in agreement that the current discretions should remain.

#### **4. Any other Comments?**

In response to a query, the Director of Financial Services explained that the scrutiny committees' views would be reported to Cabinet as part of the production of their draft budget strategy which would then be consulted upon (stage 2).



## Exception Report Feedback

### Environmental Services Scrutiny Committee 1<sup>st</sup> December 2014

- The Vice Chairman queried how many flu jabs had been offered to Council staff and how much it cost to provide the vaccinations. The Director, Financial Services confirmed that flu jabs had been offered to all members of staff in order to address the levels of sickness days lost to flu and the total cost of the flu vaccinations had been provided.
- The Director of Highways and StreetCare Services was asked to explain the low number of fixed penalties issued for dog fouling and the committee was informed that work had been concentrated on the new policy for side waste collection, and that dog fouling was a difficult area to evidence as people will not provide the necessary information for action to be taken. The provision of bags for dog fouling was also addressed and Members informed that they were made available as a good will gesture to the residents of the County Borough.
- The Director also responded to a query in respect of food waste for commercial premises and whether the initiative had yet been rolled out across the Borough. The Director of Highways and StreetCare Services reported that this was not the case as yet; however, the costs of the initiative have now been reviewed with the project up and running, with all commercial businesses being included, by April 2015. The officer added that Trade Waste bags will also be incorporated following the review process and a subsequent report to Cabinet.
- The Vice Chairman sought clarification as to why a meeting involving key partners was deferred in September 2014 to discuss collaborative arrangements for Sexual Violence & Domestic Abuse Forum. The Service Director Public Health & Protection explained that key partners were unavailable in the second quarter but the meeting had subsequently been held in the third quarter and a way forward was agreed.
- Members queried the below average performance of the Council with regards to collecting municipal waste prepared for reuse and/or recycled including source segregated bio wastes that are composted or treated biologically in another way, with the Quarter 2 performance at 76.19% compared to a target of 100%. The Director of Highways and StreetCare explained that they were currently out to tender for the residual waste processing and assured Members that the figure for October 2014 depicts a better picture showing the work undertaken in respect of side waste issues. The Officer outlined the process of collecting the waste for the benefit of Members. The issue of waste segregation was also addressed with Members being informed that the process would require higher numbers of vehicles and would be more resource intensive than figures outlined by Welsh Government.

- The Service Director Public Health & Protection responded to the issue of More Card owners being able to reclaim the cost of parking from the Leisure Centre which was not considered cost effective. He confirmed that arrangements for the 'More' cards are currently under review and that this particular issue would be flagged up with the Head of Leisure Services.
- One committee member queried the intentions of some of the companies involved in the Green Deal initiative which has been up and running in the area and who are charging residents an assessment fee. The Service Director, Public Health & Protection outlined the idea behind the scheme for the benefit of committee and advised Members that residents can in some circumstances access the same energy efficiency tools free of charge. The Officer advised any residents to contact the Council's Housing Team for advice on who to approach for this type of work.
- In relation to fly tipping incidents which lead to enforcement activity the Director of Highways and StreetCare dismissed the idea that the recent increase seen in the number of fly tipping incidents was related to the £10 charge. The Officer also defended the figures showing the quarter two performance being worse than the all Wales picture. He explained that Rhondda-Cynon-Taff use the PI 's correctly and if fly tipping is reported it is tackled immediately which can affect the outcome of the PI's.
- A query was raised in respect of the Quarter 2 performance for food businesses which are broadly compliant with food law (89.93%) which is worse than the Wales average (90.33%). The Service Director, Public Health & Protection acknowledged the Rhondda- Cynon-Taff performance as having improved significantly and consistent with the Wales average. The Officer also addressed the performance in respect of the percentage of significant breaches that were rectified by intervention during the year for Animal Health with the Quarter 2 performance at 66.7% compared to a target of 75.00%. It was explained that significant breaches can in some cases take between 6months to a year to resolve and might not be concluded within the same year which will affect the PI outcome; however he did confirm that the picture is improving in the next quarter.

## **Exception Report Feedback**

### **Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee –3<sup>rd</sup> December 2014**

- A Member referred to the positive exception highlighted at page 20 of the report ie 'Average number of days all homeless families with children spent in Bed & Breakfast accommodation (local)'. Quarter 2 performance was 5.5% compared to a target of 15% and the Member asked for an explanation. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing explained that this was a volatile performance indicator due to the small number of families involved. As a result just one additional family needing bed and breakfast accommodation can impact significantly on actual performance. He reported that whilst current performance was favourable against target it was slightly higher than achieved in 2013/14 but nonetheless compared favourably with other authorities. The Service Director reported that the service worked hard to prevent homelessness and would only in emergencies place families in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- A Member commented that to outperform other authorities in Wales was commendable and would welcome the opportunity to meet the people who manage the service. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing explained that over recent years the Council's Housing Advice Centre had increasingly focussed on preventative work through the introduction of a Housing Solutions based operating model. He explained that the Service has well established working relationship with all partners, including Shelter Cymru who sit in the Housing Advice Centre. The Service Director reported that additional funding had been used to employ Staff with specialist areas, for example in relation to prisoner leavers and private sector landlords, which had seen an increase in good quality private sector properties for homeless people.
- A Member asked whether the new Housing Allocation scheme would make a difference. The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that both he and the Service Director Public Health and Protection worked closely together and the new Housing Solutions Model together with the work undertaken with the Common Housing Register and the work with landlords should all combine to ensure an effective service. A Member commented that she had reason to work closely with the Housing Advice Centre and wished to commend the staff.
- The Service Director, Direct Services, Business and Housing reported that he would be happy to make a presentation to the next meeting of the Committee
- A Member referred to the list of exceptions on page 20 of the report and asked whether they could be better aligned based on the service. The Director of Financial Services responded that he would consider whether the presentation of the information could be improved.

- A Member referred to the performance exception in relation to the % of major planning applications determined during the year within 8 weeks and asked whether the reform of the planning process in Wales would assist the approval rate. The Service Director, Planning explained that this particular performance indicator was a challenge for every Council and also pointed out that major planning applications needed to be considered properly. He confirmed that the Welsh Government's review of the planning process would likely lead to a change in the performance measure.

## **Exception Report Feedback**

### **Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee –11<sup>th</sup> December 2014**

- One Member of the Committee asked whether it would be possible to provide committee with the figures for the number of people using Public Library Services in percentages rather than in figures and also requested information regarding mobile libraries. The Head of Community Learning agreed that this would be provided and stated that since the closure of 13 libraries the attendance figures have been closely monitored and findings confirm that the visitor numbers have to date decreased by 27% with 23% of people who have lost their local library now using their nearest available facility. Members were assured that there has been an increase in the amount of people using the mobile libraries with more children having access to the service due to the extended hours after school time.
- Members sought clarity on the number of physical assaults on staff which have resulted in a number of fixed term exclusions which was highlighted in the Key Performance Issues of the Q2 report. The Service Director for Schools and Community advised that the number of assaults is small and restorative approaches are being made to guide children through their difficulties. Members were reminded that some of the issues relating to assaults can be attributed to disabilities and incidents in special schools where the behaviour needs to be carefully managed. The Director of Education & Lifelong Learning reported that the numbers of exclusions are relatively low with levels of attendance and attainment rising and explained that some instances of exclusion can be for half a day 'cooling off' period which is having an impact.
- One Member questioned the standard of the Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) which is being rolled out across all primary and secondary schools within the next few years. The Director Education & Lifelong Learning explained that some high performing staff and outstanding teachers are supporting the OTP with schools such as Treorchy becoming accredited as Hub Schools. The Director confirmed that the accreditation programme is of a very high quality where only good schools with very thorough teachers are attaining success.
- A Member referred to the one of the Critical Improvement Actions which related to improving Member scrutiny of individual school performance and was informed that Estyn are looking to provide general scrutiny training in the future with the emphasis on the use of data. Officers agreed that a date for the training supplied by Estyn would be circulated to Members in due course and in the meantime possible in house training could be considered.
- The final query on the Q2 Exception report related to Outcome 2: High Quality teaching and learning and the change in the process for

standardised scores due to flaws being identified in previous years which have had an impact upon the primary and secondary school score results. The Director of Education & Lifelong Learning outlined the reasons for the change in process and explained that the procedure is now based on actual data which should, in the future, reflect in trends in comparison to those across all Wales.



## Exception Report Feedback

### Community & Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 15<sup>th</sup> December 2014

- A Member referred to the pie chart which set out operational performance and voiced her concern regarding the number of performance indicators which had not hit target. She questioned whether the targets themselves were realistic and asked what needed to be done in terms of targeting resources in order to improve. The Group Director commented that he did not feel that the targets were inappropriate and would prefer to aim high rather than set lower targets which would be more easily achieved. He explained that in some cases even achieving the set targets would still leave the Authority in the bottom quartile for performance. He further explained that the service was going through a period of transition with the Social Services and Wellbeing Act bringing challenges which required cultural changes which were difficult to bring about in an area of high levels of deprivation. He reported that the most important priority during this time was to keep people safe.
- A Member asked whether any research had been undertaken to establish the level of need in each of the County Borough areas and asked whether the Act set out any requirements with regard to targeting resources. The Group Director reported that the Act did not include any such requirements but explained that as a service they did prioritise and move staff around as necessary.
- A Member pointed out that the sickness levels were high, particularly in relation to long term sickness and asked what was being done to respond to this. The Group Director agreed that the sickness levels were too high and informed Members that work was being undertaken with Human Resources to maximise attendance. He informed Members that he was aware of the financial impact of sickness and as a Group it was intended to target long term sickness and revisit the management of the monitoring systems. He hoped to update Members at the time of the next quarterly monitoring report.
- A Member referred to the exceptions set out at page 12 of the report and voiced her concern that those in relation to Children's Services were some way off target. She asked for reassurance that work would be undertaken to improve the situation. The Service Director, Children's Services reported that significant staff issues coupled with the rise in referrals had placed pressure on the service. He reported that improvement was now being seen but that the starting base had been low.
- The Group Director advised that the latest figures for the % of initial assessments carried out within 7 working days showed that the service was now hitting target and felt that the Service Director should be credited for bringing about this improvement. He also informed Members of the work

being undertaken across the teams to re-model the service which would lead to improvement in relation to the performance indicators in the long term.

- A Member pointed out that this indicator was a statutory obligation and also pointed out that the Committee had a responsibility to ensure that this issue was being addressed. The Group Director advised that he had met with CSSIW that day. He reported that they had acknowledged that improvement was being made and their main concern was the continued high numbers on the Child Protection Register and Looked After Children. The work being undertaken with staff was making a difference and he hoped that they had turned a corner. However, the performance figures over the coming months would confirm whether or not this was the case. With reference to the indicator in relation to the percentage of open cases of children with an allocated social worker he explained that the staff were all qualified and experienced but not necessarily social workers. He reported that work was being undertaken with regard to the mix of social workers and those not qualified as social workers across the teams which again should improve the performance of the indicator.
- A Member asked if it was known what percentage of staff were not qualified social workers. The Service Director explained that an exercise had been undertaken to establish this and he would provide this information to Members.
- A Member asked whether it was intended to continue delivering services on a locality based module ie Rhondda, Cynon and Taff. The Group Director reported that it would be unwise to give a blanket assurance but did assure Members that any decision on the type of model used would be based on what was best in terms of delivering the service.
- A Member asked for an explanation of the 'additional external support' referred to at page 20 of the agenda - Me08 'the number of applications for mainstream Foster Carers presented to Panel during the year'. The Group Director reported that Children's Services was now 1 year into a 2 year contract with an independent agency engaged to support the recruitment of foster carers. Whilst this approach was generating more enquiries there was still work to do to ensure that these enquiries translated into an increase in approved foster parents.
- A Member questioned the delay in the implementation of the new SWIFT based Single Core Assessment and the Service Director, Children's Services confirmed that this did 'go live' on 17<sup>th</sup> November. He explained that this combined assessment approach was part of the work to reduce bureaucracy.
- The Chair referred to the Outcome Agreement indicator in relation to the number of attendances at carer training events during the year. The Service Director, Adult Locality Services and Sort Term Intervention reported that

whilst they had been unable to run as many large events this year they had undertaken more smaller group work.

- A Member pointed to the importance of hitting the Outcome Agreement targets in order to maximise funding. The Director of Financial Services informed Members that it was a requirement to hit 80% of the targets to qualify for the maximum funding available and funding was then tapered depending on performance.
- A Member suggested that it was misleading to imply in the WPI Action Plan that the Regional Adoption Service was established. The Group Director explained that whilst the actual tasks referred to within the Plan had been completed he agreed that the way it was set out was misleading. He informed Members that he was presenting a progress report to Cabinet the next day.
- A Member asked whether it was known what proportion of sickness was attributable to stress related reasons.
- The Group Director reported that there was data available in relation to sickness attributable to stress but that this may not show if it was work related or due to other reasons. The Member commented that given the increase in workload he was concerned for the welfare of the staff especially in a time economic uncertainty. The Group Director acknowledged that many staff did go above and beyond what was expected of them and explained that the Service Director, with the support of the unions, had maintained an effective workforce despite a level of absenteeism.
- With reference to the Sickness Absence Health Check information a Member queried the role of 'Technician' referred to under occupational health activities. She was informed that this would be established.
- A Member referred to the delay in the Prevention Strategy being reported to Cabinet. The Service Director, Children's Services informed the Committee that the Strategy had been completed but it had been considered sensible to delay presenting the report until the completion of the re-modelling work should there be a need to make any adjustments. He informed Members that the model itself had been agreed but that options to deliver the model were still under consideration. However, it was hoped to be complete by April 2015.