



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 21 October 2021 at 5.00 pm.

County Borough Councillors - Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor M Powell (Chair)

Councillor G Thomas	Councillor S Bradwick
Councillor R Yeo	Councillor S. Rees-Owen
Councillor J Williams	Councillor J Cullwick
Councillor H Boggis	Councillor S Evans
Councillor J Edwards	

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Mr D James, Service Director – Prosperity & Development
Ms P McCarthy, Head of Legal Property and Estates
Mr S Gale, Director of Prosperity & Development
Mr A Wilkins – Director of Legal Services
Mr C Davies – Corporate Policy & Consultation Manager
Mrs S Handy – Members' Researcher & Scrutiny Officer

Other County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor M Adams, Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Councillor M Norris, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

Co-Opted Members:-

Mr J Fish, Parent/Governor Representative

20 SCRUTINY RESEARCH FUNCTION

The Members' Researcher and Scrutiny Officer referenced the research facilities that were available to Members within the Council Business Unit. Members were advised that if they have any specific queries to email them to Scrutiny@rctcbc.gov.uk.

21 Apologies

Apologies of absence were received from County Borough Councillors G. Caple, J. James and T. Williams.

22 Declaration of Interest

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

23 Minutes

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 8th September 2021 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

24 Consultation Links

The Members' Researcher & Scrutiny Officer referenced the consultation links, which were available through the 'RCT Scrutiny' website. Members were reminded that information is provided in respect of relevant consultations for consideration by the Committee, which are circulated on a monthly basis.

25 Engagement on the Council's Budget

The Corporate Policy & Consultation Manager presented the report on the proposed approach to resident engagement and consultation in respect of the 2022/23 budget setting process.

Members were reminded that in previous years the Council has undertaken a comprehensive approach to its annual budget consultation, involving a large number of residents and key stakeholders. The Corporate Policy & Consultation Manager went on to inform Members that the current Covid-19 pandemic presents a unique set of circumstances for engagement and consultation, and in light of this, the 2022/23 annual budget consultation will include a number of digital methods, whilst continuing to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the internet and those who prefer to engage through more traditional methods. The Corporate Policy & Consultation Manager added that the approach this year will reintroduce a number of face-to-face engagement events in the community.

The Corporate Policy & Consultation Manager also updated Members on the different approaches that will take place, noting the 'Let's Talk' on-line engagement platform and engagement with:

- Older people via the Older Persons Advisory Group meeting
- Young people via Rhondda Cynon Taf's Youth Forums. (Instagram).
- A presentation and discussion with young people via our schools/colleges.
- Report and presentation to the Finance and Performance

- Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum.
- A presentation at the Community Liaison Committee
 - Disability forum engagement
 - Armed Forces and Veterans Groups engagement.

Further to the overview of the report, Members raised several questions.

Mr Fish, the Parent/Governor Representative, referred Members to section 5.5 of the report and the development of an online survey. Mr Fish highlighted that following several previous requests the Committee is not involved in reviewing the questions to be included in the Council's budget consultation process. The Service Director, Democratic Services & Communication acknowledged that this is an area that has been raised previously by the Committee; however, the Service Director clarified that it is Cabinet's responsibility to set the remit of the engagement strategy of the budget setting process and emphasised that the Cabinet Report 'Engagement on the Council's Budget 2022/23' is brought to the Scrutiny Committee to assure Members that the process is robust. Mr Fish noted the response and reiterated the dialogue that has taken place on this area as part of previous meetings.

Discussions continued and Councillor Thomas supported the approaches outlined in the report. The Service Director added that with regard to the 'Let's Talk' on-line engagement platform, this provides greater flexibility for residents to engage in the process and provide their feedback. The Corporate Policy and Consultation Manager also advised Members that in addition to being able to complete the on-line survey, the 'Let's Talk' on-line platform provides opportunity for residents to provide feedback on a range of areas in relation to the 2022/23 budget setting process.

Councillor Rees-Owen raised a query in respect of the telephone consultation via the Council's Contact Centre and noted that residents can get very frustrated if they are in a long queue on the telephone. Councillor Rees-Owen sought clarity on what steps can be taken to alleviate this situation arising. The Service Director acknowledged that this can be a challenge and confirmed that he would liaise with relevant officers to consider options.

Discussions ensued and the Chair queried whether backbench Members of the Authority were allowed to take part in the face-to-face consultations planned. The Corporate Policy and Consultation Manager advised Members that they are roadshows public events and the Service Director advised that Members of the Authority also have other opportunities available to them to engage in the budget setting process.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to:

1. Support an online approach to the Council's budget consultation for 2022/23, using the Council's new Let's Talk Engagement website along with the re-introduction of some face-to-face events in the community;
2. Support the Council's statutory requirements regarding consultation on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Council Tax levels will be met via the proposed approach;
3. Support the budget consultation process taking place during the autumn of 2021, with the dates to be confirmed following clarification of the Welsh Government budget settlement timescales; and
4. Support the Service Director – Democratic Services & Communications to plan the necessary timeline of engagement once the details of the Provisional Local Government Settlement are known, in consultation with the appropriate Cabinet Member & Director of Finance & Digital Services.

26 Regeneration Grants

The Director of Prosperity & Development outlined the grant assistance delivered by the Regeneration Service to businesses in Rhondda Cynon Taf to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members were advised that the economy in Rhondda Cynon Taf has been severely impacted since the start of 2020 as result of the devastating storms and flooding followed immediately by the COVID- 19 pandemic with the subsequent lockdown measures and restrictions. A significant level of financial assistance was delivered via the Regeneration Service (alongside other financial support delivered across the Council) to support businesses respond to the economic challenges they faced, helping them build their resilience, supporting economic diversification and growth, with the aim of encouraging sustainability and hopefully stimulating future private sector investment.

Following the overview, Members were given the opportunity to ask questions.

Councillor Bradwick sought clarification on how many grants were provided to each Town Centre. The Director advised that he did not have the information to hand but that he would take that request away and circulate to Members.

Mr Fish, the Parent/Governor Representative, advised that a number of these schemes were unfortunately targeted by fraud. Mr Fish sought clarification as to what safeguards are in place and queried whether all the money was distributed appropriately. The Director advised that there

was an urgent need at the beginning of the pandemic to process support payments as timely as possible alongside a rigorous assessment process, to support businesses who were at risk of 'going under'. The Director acknowledged that there was potential for fraud, however, he felt confident that the money was given out appropriately and as timely as possible. Councillor Thomas acknowledged that there will always be a risk of problems with any new system that is put forward but that the essential point is that the grants were refocused to assist with a difficult situation.

Discussions continued and Councillor Boggis referenced that 23 applications that were approved for Town Centre funding and sought clarification as to how many applications were received. The Director advised that he will collate the information and circulate it to Members accordingly.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to note the update contained within the report.

27 Quarter 1 Performance Report

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services presented the Council's Quarter 1 Performance Report (to 30th June 2021).

The Service Director explained that the Quarter 1 Performance Report was presented to Cabinet on the 21st September 2021 and contains revenue and capital budget performance; Treasury Management prudential indicators; Organisational Health information, including staff turnover; sickness and Council strategic risks; and Corporate Plan priority progress updates.

The Service Director completed the overview of the Report by providing an update on the progress made across the Council's 3 Corporate Plan priority areas of People, Places and Prosperity and, following this, Members put forward their questions.

Councillor Bradwick agreed with the reference within the Performance Report in respect of the need for the temporary storage of wood that has primarily been deposited at Community Recycling Centres, this being due to supply outweighing demand from panel board manufacturers who recycle the wood to make products such as wooden pallets. The Service Director added that this position is now starting to improve. Councillor Bradwick also sought clarification as to whether there had been any progress on the Bryn Pica Eco Park development. The Service Director fed back that a business case is in place and discussions are on-going with Welsh Government in terms of funding options.

Discussions continued and Councillor Cullwick referred Members to page 41 of the report and noted that the sickness figures in schools is low and

wanted to congratulate Headteachers of schools and Governors. The Service Director made Members aware of the recording and reporting of sickness absence during the pandemic, in that where staff are unavailable for work due to, for example, self-isolating or having an underlying health condition that places an individual at risk, these occurrences have not been categorised as sickness absence and have been excluded from the analysis. The Service Director went on to say that schools have continued to provide education provision to pupils across the County Borough in the most challenging circumstances and added that the Council has a range of health and well-being support arrangements in place for its employees. Councillor Bradwick also wished to place on record his admiration for school staff and their efforts during the pandemic.

The Chair continued discussions and referenced the high level of sickness absence within Community and Children's Services and sought further information, and also referenced page 48 of the report and requested information on the impact on the Council from tourism developments such as Zip World. The Service Director fed back that the impact of tourism developments would be discussed with the Regeneration Service and an update provided to Members, and with regard to sickness absence, the Committee were sign-posted to further detailed information included as an electronic link within the Performance Report.

Mr Fish, the Parent/Governor Representative, noted that in terms of Zip World, there appeared to be a lack of signage on the main routes to the attraction and requested further information on this position. The Service Director indicated that this information will be fed back to the Director of Prosperity & Development who would update Members accordingly.

Councillor Yeo noted the positive work continuing in respect of affordable housing and also the positive progress with regard to the Llanilid site.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to:

1. Endorse the Council's financial and operational performance position as at 30th June 2021 (Quarter 1).

28 Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2021/22 to 2024/25

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services introduced the Council's 'Medium Term Financial Plan 2021/22 to 2024/25' (MTFP).

Members were informed that the MTFP is reported to the Committee to ensure Members are kept up to date with the budget modelling work undertaken as part of the Council's medium term financial planning arrangements and to also aid the Committee's preparation in its role as a consultee of the 2022/23 budget consultation process.

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services informed Members that the 2022/23 Budget Consultation is an agenda item scheduled for the Committee's November 2021 meeting, this being subject to Cabinet's approval of the 'Engagement on the Council's Budget' report on 18th October 2021 (the 'Engagement on the Council's Budget' report also being a separate item for the 21st October 2021 Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting agenda).

Following the overview, Members were provided with the opportunity to ask questions.

Councillor Yeo acknowledged the comprehensive report and noted that the UK Government have announced plans to support social care with a National Insurance rise and hoped that this will mean additional resources to support the social care sector in Wales.

Discussions ensued and Councillor Adams, Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, referred the Committee to the Council's on-going efficiency saving requirement and noted the importance for the UK Central Government to provide sufficient funding to local government, taking into account the sector's significant role in the County's on-going recover from the pandemic and the additional on-going cost pressures being incurred by local government as a result of Covid-19. Councillor Adams also raised the roll-out of the new reusable sack to collect green waste and sought clarity in respect of the funding for the bags. The Service Director advised Members that in terms of efficiency savings, the Council continues to take a proactive approach in reviewing all areas of its business to identify budget saving opportunities, with this being an on-going process. The Service Director added that the Council, along with all Welsh local authorities, is engaging with Welsh Government to set out the financial challenges and the need for sufficient funding, and noted that Welsh Government is engaging with the UK Central Government, who provide the majority of funding for public services in Wales, to set out the case for a fair funding settlement for Wales. The Service Director went on to cover the new reusable sacks for green waste and confirmed that Welsh Government funding has been received to fund the roll-out and noted that a 10% reduction in plastic recycling bags is anticipated.

The Chair continued the discussions and queried whether there has been any impact on funding compared to what would have ordinarily been received pre-Brexit from the European Union. The Service Director advised that the impact has not been felt on the ground as European Union funded projects continue to be delivered in line with agreed timescales, albeit, there is the need for the Council to continue to be proactive in applying for replacement funding such as 'Levelling Up' and other sources of government funding as it becomes available. Councillor Yeo also noted his concerns regarding the potential drop in funding as a result of Brexit.

Discussions continued and Councillor Bradwick acknowledged the detailed report and noted the positive anticipated impact from the roll-out

of reusable sacks for green waste. Councillor Thomas also acknowledged the detailed report and noted his concerns as to how the Council will be able to maintain the level of services provided to residents if sufficient funding is not provided to local government in Wales as well as increasing inflationary cost pressures and energy price increases.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to note the update contained within the 'Medium Term Financial Plan 2021/22 to 2024/25' (**Appendix A**) as reported to Cabinet on 20th July 2021.

29 TO CONSIDER PASSING THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION:-

It was **RESOLVED** that the press and public be excluded from the meeting under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) for Item 10 of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of the exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Part 4 of the Schedule 12A of the Act.

30 Corporate Asset Management Plan 2018/23: Interim Update.

The Head of Legal And Strategic Property provided the Committee with an Interim update in respect of the Corporate Asset Management Plan 2018/23.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to note the update contained within the report.

31 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business to report.

32 Chair's Review and Close

The Chair thanked Members for attending and for engaging in a constructive and focused discussion. The Chair also reminded Members that the next meeting date will be the 30th November 2021.

This meeting closed at 6.57 pm

**CLLR M. POWELL
CHAIR.**