

PHASE 1 BUDGET CONSULTATION (2020/21) - PRE-SCRUTINY OUTCOMES

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 16 December 2019 at 5.00 pm at the Council Chambers, The Pavilions, Cambrian Park. Clydach Vale, Tonypany, CF40 2XX.

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

Councillor G Thomas Councillor S Bradwick
Councillor R Yeo Councillor J Williams
Councillor J Cullwick Councillor G Caple

Officers in attendance:-

Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Mr A Wilkins, Director of Legal Services
Mr S Gale, Director of Prosperity & Development
Mr T Jones, Service Director – ICT & Digital Services

County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor M Adams, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Councillor R Bevan, Cabinet Member for Enterprise Development & Housing

Others:-

Mr J. Fish, Voting Elected Parent / Governor Representative

30 Welcome

The Vice Chair welcomed Members to the meeting of the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and thanked everyone for attending.

31 Declaration of Interest

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

32 Apologies

Apologies of absence were received from County Borough Councillors M. Powell, M. Diamond, A. Davies-Jones, G. Holmes, W. Lewis, S. Rees-Owen, A. Fox and T. Williams.

33 Minutes

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 4th of November 2019 as an accurate reflection of the meeting, subject to the following amendments:-

- Item 24, page 7 to be amended as follows; “Councillor Thomas commented that the greater proportion of areas in the Cynon Valley are not being charged CIL”.

Extract from Minutes

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, the Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services provided Members with an overview of the 2020/21 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation and updated Committee on the following areas:

- Approach for 2020/21
- Consultation
 - Council Budget 2020/21
 - The Council’s Priorities
 - Council Tax Reduction Scheme
 - Draft Corporate Plan 2020 – 24
- Budget Setting Timetable

Following the update, the Service Director indicated that the overview intended to assist Members in formulating their responses to a number of questions to be posed to the Committee, in line with its Terms of Reference and as a consultee as part of the 2020/21 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation process. The Service Director added that the feedback provided by Members would be presented to Cabinet alongside the feedback from all other consultees as part of Cabinet agreeing a proposed Budget Strategy for 2020/21.

The Service Director sought feedback from the Committee on a number of areas and the views of Members are noted below.

With regard to Question 1 on Council Tax, Members supported a less than 3% increase to help support the continuation of service provision in the context of rising cost pressures and demand for specific services. Members also commented that in setting the level of Council Tax for 2020/21 regard should be given to the level of funding the Council is anticipated to receive via the local government settlement from Welsh Government.

In respect of Question 2 on Schools Budget, Committee Members agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay costs in schools throughout RCT. However, a member of the Committee highlighted that other cost pressures, over and above pay costs, should also be fully funded. An elected Member fed back that the same question should also be included as part of the consultation process for Community and Children’s Services and not just in respect of schools.

For question 3 covering fees and charges, the following points were fed back:

- A number of Members considered that school meal prices should be frozen and all other areas should be increased by 1.5%, and highlighted their continued support for the promotion of free school meals;
- A Member cautioned against increasing the charges for Town Centre Car Parking and it was fed back that there should be no increase to the cost of a resident car parking permit;
- A Member cautioned against increasing the fees for Meals on Wheels and noted that the Council needs to encourage more residents to use this service;
- A Member felt that the Council should consider increasing the level of charges for tourist attractions as charges seem to be lower in comparison to other areas of Wales; and
- A number of Members considered that charges for the bulky waste collection service and pest control service should be frozen.

Following Member feedback, the Service Director provided further information on specific areas. In respect free school meals, the Service Director informed Members that transitional / protection arrangements have come into force across Wales in 2019 that mean all eligible children entitled to free school meals will retain their entitlement for a set period even if their circumstances change and no longer meet the eligibility criteria. Members indicated that they were not aware of these changes and requested further information. In respect of car parking charges, the Service Director fed back that charges are only applied in Aberdare and Pontypridd Town Centres, with different charges for short and long stay, and have been frozen for a number of years.

With regard to Question 4, Council Service priorities, Committee Members agreed that all Council services are essential and should be protected as part of the 2020/21 budget setting process.

For Question 5, delivery of efficiencies, Members agreed that setting a Council wide efficiency saving target was a good approach and that managers should be supported to deliver even more efficient services, where possible. However, Members considered that the year-on-year delivery of efficiency savings is becoming more difficult to achieve without impacting on frontline services and highlighted the importance of protecting staff as part of any future budget savings proposals. A Member also highlighted that exploiting more digital working could provide opportunities for the Council to deliver better and more efficient services.

At this point, the Service Director asked Members if there was any other general comments they would like to provide on the Council's budget, as part of Question 6. Members noted that they had no further points to feedback at this point and requested the Service Director to continue with the presentation.

Discussions continued in respect of the Council's priorities for the 2020/21 budget setting process. Members were informed that the Council focuses on five key areas to maximise resources and deliver improved services (i.e. Digitalisation; Commercialisation; Early Intervention and Prevention; Independence; and Efficient and Effective Organisation). Members were asked whether the Council should continue to focus on these areas and Members were supportive of this strategy going forward.

In respect of investment opportunities, Members were asked whether the Council should continue to invest in the priority areas listed. An elected Member raised concerns in respect of improving recycling performance and noted that Social Landlords are not engaging with the local authority. The Member emphasised that Social Landlords need to work with the Council in order to improve recycling rates across the County Borough.

A member of the Committee sought clarification in respect of the Council's investment in flood prevention schemes and sought clarity on the extent of involvement of National Resources Wales. It was noted that the flood alleviation schemes referred to are primarily Council funded projects and the Council will engage with Natural Resources Wales, as deemed appropriate, on a scheme by scheme basis.

In respect of Council reserves, Members were informed that the Council has used one off reserves (£1.1M for 2019/20) to balance its budget alongside delivering savings early in subsequent years to replenish these reserves. The Service Director added that this approach is part of a medium term financial strategy recognising that managing and balancing the revenue budget is not a one-off annual process. Members were asked whether the Council should continue with this strategy and Members agreed on the use of this strategy going forward.

With specific regard to the questions around the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the following responses were fed back by Members:

- Do you think that 4 weeks is a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work?
 - Members agreed that 4 weeks is a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work.
- Do you think that it is reasonable for the Council to continue to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to CTR scheme?
 - Members were supportive of these elements continuing to be excluded.
- Do you think that 6 months is a reasonable period to backdate claims for working age and pensioners?
 - Members fed back their agreement that 6 months is reasonable.

Discussions ensued in respect of the Council's Draft Corporate Plan 2020-24. Members were informed that three priorities are being proposed (People, Place and Prosperity) and Members were provided with the opportunity to provide their views on these priorities and ideas about anything else that would make a difference to the people and communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf. Committee Members confirmed their agreement with the proposed priorities as set out in the draft Corporate Plan 2020-24.

In conclusion, the Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services informed Members that the Committee's feedback will be considered by Cabinet as part of it agreeing a draft Revenue Budget Strategy for 2020/21 and that the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee will have opportunity to further scrutinise and comment upon the 2020/21 draft Revenue Budget Strategy at its January 2020 meeting.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED** that the views of Members as outlined above be fed into the consultation process.