

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2 - FRIDAY, 21 JANUARY 2022

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2
HELD REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON FRIDAY, 21 JANUARY 2022 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor AJ Williams – Chairperson

S Aspey
JE Lewis

MC Clarke
DBF White

SK Dendy

MJ Kearns

Apologies for Absence

PA Davies, M Jones, AA Pucella, G Thomas and KJ Watts

Officers:

Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Carys Lord	Chief Officer - Finance, Performance & Change
Claire Marchant	Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing
Janine Nightingale	Corporate Director - Communities
Michael Pitman	Democratic Services Officer - Committees
Mark Shephard	Chief Executive

1. CORPORATE PARENTING CHAMPION NOMINATION REPORT

The Senior Democratic Services Officer – Scrutiny presented a report which requested the Committee to nominate one Member as its Corporate Parenting Champion to represent the Committee as an invitee to meetings of the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting.

She explained that the role of the Corporate Parenting Champion is to represent their Overview and Scrutiny Committee, partaking in discussions with Cabinet over items relating to children in care and care leavers. She added that in this role each Champion considers how all services within the remit of Scrutiny affect children in care and care leavers and encourage their own Committee to bear their Corporate Parenting role in mind when participating in Scrutiny. Champions can greatly support the Committee by advising them of the ongoing work of the Cabinet Committee and particularly any decisions or changes which they should be aware of as Corporate Parents

RESOLVED: That the Committee nominated Cllr David White as the corporate parenting champion to represent the Committee at meetings of the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting.

2. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2022-23 TO 2025-26

The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change presented a report which updated the Scrutiny Committee on the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-23 to 2025-26, which sets out the spending priorities of the Council, key investment objectives and budget areas targeted for necessary savings. The strategy includes a financial forecast for 2022-2026 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2022-23.

She explained that on 24th February 2021, Council approved a net revenue budget of £298.956 million for 2021-22. As part of the Performance Management Framework, budget projections were reviewed regularly and reported to Cabinet on a quarterly basis.

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The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change outlined the financial overview covering the last 10 years and the budget reductions that were required of the Council totalling £62 Million. The Table at 4.1.1 outlined the year-on-year reductions.

She explained that while the Council's net revenue budget is planned at £319.510 million for 2022-23, its overall expenditure far exceeded this. Taking into account expenditure and services which were funded by specific grants or fees and charges, the Council's gross budget was estimated to be around £480 million in 2022-23.

She stated that the Council gets the majority of its revenue funding from Welsh Government through the Revenue Support Grant and a share of Non Domestic Rates. This was then supplemented through council tax collection, other grants and fees and charges. Council tax was a charge that local authorities used to help to pay for their services.

The amount that council tax payers pay was made up of 3 elements:

- Bridgend County Borough Council charge
- Town or Community Council charge
- Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales charge

The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change explained that Council Tax funded almost 30% of the Councils total budget.

The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change stated that the Council had continued to support education, early intervention, social services and wellbeing services to ensure that we prioritise the vulnerable in our society. The MTFs reiterates that going forward. The Council looks at as many ways as possible to maximize the use of the resources that it has to be able to continue to protect these services.

She added that the Council would seek to raise additional income wherever possible, however there will be limited opportunities to do so given the challenges of Covid-19. The Council would continue to seek alternative ways of delivering services to provide sustainability and efficiencies. Savings for the coming year included reviewing and rationalising council supplies and services.

The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change explained that Social Services and Wellbeing was a significant part of the budget requirements and for the coming financial year the Council proposed to spend £78 million on this area. She also highlighted the Corporate Financial Overview of other areas for information. These were highlighted in detail at 4.1.1 of the report and covered some key areas listed below:

- general efficiencies
- property savings
- alternative delivery models
- Changes to Service Provision
- Education
- Social Care and Well-being
- Departmental changes

The Chief Officer – Finance Performance and Change explained that due to the late announcement of the comprehensive spending review, the provisional Local Government settlement was not received until the 21st December 2021. The draft settlement set out revenue and capital spending plans for 2022-23 and also included planned allocations for 2023-24 and 2024-25. She advised that the headline figure for

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the revenue budget for 2022-23 was an overall increase of 9.4 4% across Wales and for Bridgend the increase was a 9.2% increase in funding from Welsh Government.

She stressed that within this settlement figure, the Council was required to meet the cost of teachers pay deal, increased National Insurance contributions as well as meeting the additional costs of introducing the real living wage for care workers. The details for this were still to be awaited.

The Chairperson asked in relation to the hardship fund, had the department shown reliance on this fund and how much had been claimed in the past.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing stated that there had been significant claims against the hardship fund made from social services and well-being. In 2020/21 over £1million was claimed in relation to the leisure arrangements with Halo. This had been due to the restrictions in place that affected Halo including opening hours and capacity as well as claims made for PPE and service management. In terms of going forward there was still some details to be worked out but the directorate was confident that it would be moving into a balanced budget next year even after the removal of the hardship fund. The Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change added that the total figures with regards to expenditure for social care to the end of December from the hardship fund was £3.8 million.

A Member asked if there was any indication of the hardship fund being offered again in the future should there be another spike or variant in Covid-19. The Chief Executive said there were no plans for a further hardship fund but there was no way of knowing what comes next in terms of Covid and therefore what Welsh Government would provide. In terms of a budget, it was important to plan as if there were no additional support like the hardship fund.

A Member referred to SSW1 in Appendix 1 of the report and asked how we prepare for the budget pressures associated with family members coming into care at very short notice and sometimes with multiple siblings.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that this was done by looking at the data in terms of demographics i.e the number of children and young people in Bridgend and then predictions are made per 10,000 people based on previous years data and then form the budget plan around that based on an individual cost.

The Chairperson asked in relation to SSW2 in the appendix, what kind of pressures had there been and could some examples be provided as well as how they had been dealt with.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that the prolonged lockdowns have had an impact on emotional health and wellbeing and the Council has worked closely with partners in Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board and developed a range of services to support this from preventative first line mental health services to more acute services. The ARC service which is open 7 days a week has seen an uptake in usage. She added that the Social Care and Assessment and Resource Team had also seen more uptake and will need further investment, further information on this aspect will also be talked about at a future Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help took the opportunity to thank the third sector workforce as the reliance that the council has had on volunteers had been significant as they had worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic.

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A Member echoed these comments and stated as he was a person who was shielding for a short time during the pandemic, he too relied on volunteers and was very grateful for the work they had done. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing thanked Members for the comments and agreed that the work by third sector was very valuable.

A Member asked in relation to SSW2, what were the pressures in terms of staffing issues and how were the levels of staff looking now and ensuring that a good service was maintained. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that initially there were staffing issues up to 16% but the numbers have been steadily decreasing particularly in the recent months but as a service we had continued to work with colleagues in HR to ensure that support had been in place for staff on ill health absences.

A Member asked in relation to SSW3 if any future pay awards ensured that all members of staff were paid the National Living Wage of £10.50 an hour. The Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help confirmed that the Council were on target for meeting that standard and had already done so in many areas.

The Chairperson asked in relation to SSW5, how successful was the in-house training and the cost of agency staff to the directorate.

The Corporate director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that the social care workforce development team were an award-winning team. They obtained an accolade for their 'First Year in Practice' programme so we were very committed in understanding the pressures that were around the social work recruitment particularly children's social work. We also work very closely with further education establishments like Bridgend College and Cardiff Met University. She added that the Council receives a Social Care Workforce Development grant from Welsh Government which funds a large portion of the cost in terms of training, agency and social work although there had been an increase in agency costs which had been challenging for all Local Authorities. As there was sometimes a significant gap in time between obtaining permanent staff particularly in the children's social care section, we have to rely on agency staff to ensure there were no vacancies in this area.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing added that a real challenge had been many of the successful applicants were already internal candidates and so there were new vacancies as soon as old ones were filled. As a result of this there has been a review of the service area and we have developed a more experienced social work post and adverts for this have recently been published.

A Member raised concerns over social workers moving to other authorities and the retention of staff can be challenging. He asked if there were any discussions on a national level about national terms and conditions so that local authorities did not need to compete with each other. The Leader commented on this and supported the idea of national terms and conditions. All local authorities had been experiencing these issues and some time and other valued professionals already had a national terms and conditions, for example teachers, nurses and doctors among some.

The Leader added that there were many administrative burdens relating to social workers and this was something that needed to be looked into to try and reduce this burden and ensure that social workers get more time with children and families.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing stated that many social workers in other authorities have the ability to undertake additional support roles and that had

proven to be successful and those local authorities attractive for social workers, so this was something that we also wished to implement.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing provided an outline with regards to SSW6 on what direct payments were within children's services.

A Member asked if there were any increase in take up on direct payments for adults social care also given the increase in the number of older people over the years. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing confirmed that there was indeed an increase in this area as well, the pressures were there but not in the same way they were for children's social care and with adults social care the payments allowed for more flexibility of care by the adult themselves or family members supporting them.

The Chairperson asked in relation to SSW7, could some clarification be given on the increase in costs.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that this related to a Cabinet report which was brought forward a number of months ago on a retender of our Supported Living services. Over a number of years, we had been seeing an increased cost from providers and so the £650,000 was an anticipated cost going into 22/23.

The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing provided a brief overview on SSW1 on Appendix B for Members. The Chairperson mentioned that all three of the RAG status for SSW proposals were listed as red and asked for some elaboration these risks. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing stated that these were linked to position that the Council finds itself in post Covid and the increased demand on services as a consequence of the extended periods of lockdown. The increased pressure on peoples physical and mental health can increase the need for services as well as the effects that are not fully understood on 'long Covid'. The services that are opening back up and becoming more like pre-covid the pressures have lessened but this may revert back if the levels of restrictions were to return.

The Chairperson asked on behalf of a Member in relation to the older generation and computer illiterate and ensuring that they were not forgotten about. She had specific concerns that people may feel isolated and may not be able to access services due to lack of access to electronic equipment, cost of broadband etc and that it was not financially viable to do so just to access a limited number of services. She believed it was important to remember that there were individuals out there who did not or could not use technology and ensuring that support was provided for them. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that many of the technologies being used were advancing in terms of their capabilities and it was particularly useful as part of care packages. An example of this was the bed sensors that can detect unusual activities whereby if the person was usually in bed at certain times or for certain lengths of time, the sensors can detect when they are not for any length of time and alert their carers so assistive technology was not a replacement for in person care service but rather an additional benefit.

The Leader mentioned that there was a number of proposals being discussed as part of the CCRC in terms of boosting connectivity in rural areas through residents and businesses.

A Member asked if there had been a reduction in use of day services. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that there had been a decrease and we had found that many people who would normally have used the day services were now enjoying their care and support given in other ways within their own communities. She added that there had also been more specialist provisions being looked at and

recently a dementia service running in Bridgend that will likely see an increase in use so it was a case of some services were being delivered in different ways that were more suitable to individual needs and other services being in ways that were preferred by the user. The Leader added that one of the services being provided was swimming lessons for people with dementia and their carers which had proven very successful.

A Member mentioned in relation to SSW2 of Appendix B, how the new ways of working dealt with the challenges of working from home and people filling in forms over the phone. Her concern was that she did not want anyone falling through the net. The Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing explained that many services will slowly start to move in a blended way to ensure that anyone who was having difficulties would still be able to access face to face support and so the aim was to utilise the best of both worlds in terms of working and providing services.

The Leader added that the needs of people were paramount to the remodelling and decision-making process and this was something that continued to be worked on to ensure that services were fit for purpose for everyone. The Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help added that the narrative of social services has shifted to become more user led and asks what cant you do, and what can we do to help you.

The Chief Executive highlighted a point relating to CW3 in Appendix 1 about the new funding that had been set aside to meet ongoing budget pressures as a result of the Covid19 pandemic. He advised that there would be a number of issues that could potentially emerge that were hard to predict and the funding of £1 million allows some flexibility. The settlement figure being greater than expected can allow us to become relaxed but with ongoing pressures and demands it was important to not become too relaxed and so the funding set aside can assist in some of those pressures that may arise.

Recommendations:

1. In relation to budget pressure SSW5, the Committee recommended that consideration be given to lobbying Welsh Government to set a Welsh national salary, terms and conditions for social workers to alleviate Childrens social worker recruitment and retention pressures for Local Authorities, similarly to the national arrangements for teachers, police and nurses.
2. In addition to the above, the Committee expressed concern at the significant reliance and potential cost of agency staff in Children's Services and requested assurance that the situation is kept under review and all that can be done to reduce it considered.
3. In relation to budget reduction proposal SSW1, the Committee recommended consideration is given to ensure that service users are not excluded by the use of technology / digital service delivery.
4. In relation to budget reduction proposal SSW2, the Committee requested assurance that consideration of new ways of working includes options for face-to-face service e.g., for those who are unable to engage in other ways e.g., via telephone completion of forms, etc.

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5. In relation to budget reduction proposal SSW3, the Committee suggested that the use of the term service remodelling had negative perceptions which could have adverse impact on staff and service users and did not make clear the extensive advocacy and consultation undertaken to listen to the wishes of service users, and recommended consideration be given to more positive terminology and explanation of the budget line, such as tailoring or ongoing continuous improvement, etc.

6. In relation to general comments relating to budget pressure CW3, the Committee recommended that consideration be given to reviewing the £1M pressure, as due to the extent of the significant reliance on the former Welsh Government hardship fund by a number of services including those within Social Services and Wellbeing, there was concern that the figure may be insufficient and a reduction in service delivery could ensue.

3. **URGENT ITEMS**

None