

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WEDNESDAY, 20 JANUARY 2021

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD REMOTELY VIA SKYPE FOR BUSINESS ON WEDNESDAY, 20 JANUARY 2021 AT
10:00**

Present

Councillor – Chairperson

TH Beedle	JPD Blundell	MC Clarke	N Clarke
RJ Collins	P Davies	PA Davies	DK Edwards
J Gebbie	T Giffard	CA Green	DG Howells
A Hussain	M Jones	MJ Kearns	DRW Lewis
JE Lewis	RL Penhale-Thomas	AA Pucella	KL Rowlands
RMI Shaw	JC Spanswick	RME Stirman	MC Voisey
LM Walters	KJ Watts	A Williams	AJ Williams
JE Williams			

Apologies for Absence

Councillors: SE Baldwin, B Sedgebeer, E Venables, CA Webster, and DBF White, and Nicola Echanis - Head of Education and Family Support.

Registered Representatives

Rev Canon Edward Evans	Church in Wales
Linsey Morris	Secondary Schools Sector

Officers:

Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Andrew Rees	Democratic Services Manager
Tracy Watson	Scrutiny Officer

Invitees:

Victoria Adams	Interim Finance Manager – Budget Management: Communities, Education and Family Support
Councillor Nicole Burnett	Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help
Hannah Castle	Head Teacher, Cynffig Comprehensive School
Neil Clode	Head Teacher, Llangewydd Primary School
Councillor Huw David	Leader
Lindsay Harvey	Corporate Director Education and Family Support
Gill Lewis	Interim Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change
Janine Nightingale	Corporate Director - Communities
Councillor Dhanisha Patel	Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations
Zak Shell	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Mark Shephard	Chief Executive
Councillor Charles Smith	Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration
Councillor Hywel Williams	Deputy Leader
Councillor Richard Young	Cabinet Member for Communities

198. ELECTION OF CHAIRPERSON

RESOLVED:

1. That Councillor T Giffard be elected as Chairperson of the Combined Meeting of all Overview & Scrutiny Committees

up to the conclusion of Item 4 in respect of Education and Family Support.

2. That Councillor JPD Blundell be elected as Chairperson of the Combined Meeting of all Overview & Scrutiny Committees for the consideration of Item 4, in respect of Communities.

199. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairperson explained to Members that it was recognised that many of them would be LEA governors and as such there was no requirement to declare an interest however, if any Members had any declarations such as a Community Governor, they must declare those interests.

Cllr JP Blundell declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 because he was a Community Governor at Cefn Glas Infants School.

Rev. Canon E Evans, Registered Representative, Church in Wales, declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 because he was a Community Governor of Bryntirion Comprehensive School

L Morris, Registered Representative, Secondary Schools Sector declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 because she was a Parent Governor at Maesteg Comprehensive School.

Councillor J Gebbie declared a personal interest in agenda Item 4 as she was Chair of Mynydd Cynffig.

Councillor T Beedle declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 as he was Chair of Bridgend Governors Association.

200. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2021-22 TO 2024-25

Education and Family Support

The Interim Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change presented a report, the purpose of which was to present the Committee with the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-22 to 2024-25, which set out the spending priorities of the Council, key investment objectives and budget areas targeted for necessary savings. The strategy included a financial forecast for 2021-2025 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2021-22.

The Chair thanked the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change and explained that this was the session on the Education and Family Support Directorate, with the Communities one to follow.

A Member stated that she had heard the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change speak many times and challenged the use of the word 'savings', stating that the Local Authority was not saving anything, but trying to make cuts to services because it didn't have the budget consequentially.

A Member referred to page 39, ESF5 and a reference to autistic spectrum disorder children and asked whether the pandemic had any detrimental effect on autistic children. What had been the experience and how badly, or not, had these children been affected.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that he was proud that Bridgend had established a number of settings to support the needs of learners with ASD, both in English and Welsh Medium settings. It was fair to say that the last 10 months had been deeply challenging for all sorts of learners. He praised schools for the phenomenal efforts put in place to make sure children were not affected and highlighted his personal experience of visiting schools and observing learners happy and settled within those settings.

In terms of additional support from the local authority, this took different avenues including additional support within classroom settings, within schools with learning resource centres, additional support from learning support staff and also staff within the school and in bespoke settings within the specialist school environment, providing support for families as well when learners were not on site. From the feedback received, this had been successful. It had inevitably affected learners, but from the efforts of school staff and inclusion staff in particular, the local authority aimed to mitigate any risk to learners' wellbeing.

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration began by thanking relevant staff, noting that every autistic person was different. What was shared by many autistic people was that change was not welcome and timetabling changes could be upsetting. He noted the dedication of expert staff in special schools and settings in mainstream schools which had been recognised by Estyn, who were very supportive of the Team Bridgend approach.

A Member referred to page 39, ESF6. He noted the figure of £903k for 2021-22 and recurring amount of £1.1million in future years and asked how the figure had been calculated and whether it was a percentage of the budget, how was it split across Education, where did it go altogether and was it just for schools. In respect of the Development Plan impact, this meant additional houses, bringing in additional council tax. How was this calculated and would it be used across different service areas in Education.

The Interim Deputy Head of Finance explained pupil numbers from all schools were collected at a couple of points during the financial year, as well as collecting predictions of estimated pupil numbers for future years. The local authority looked at forward planning, in terms of how it would affect pupil numbers in total including primary and secondary school numbers. Therefore, it changed throughout the years with those figures updated. It was also based upon the age rated pupil unit, which was used to fund schools, so it was a combination of the numbers and the funding age group, noting that it related to school delegated budgets and if there were significant increases there maybe an impact upon support services provided to schools. In terms of the LDP the local authority did not get the funding in the settlement until a couple of years after those pupil numbers had actually gone to school and been registered and gone on to the Pupil level annual school census (PLASC) data forms. She confirmed that it went directly to schools.

A Member referred to page 39, ESF7 in relation to the one off pressure of £1.2million, whilst the review of home to school transport was undertaken. He was concerned to see it as a one off pressure and asked for an update on the review and how the money would be spent, noting this had been on the agenda for years.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support reminded Members that the decision about home to school transport had been deferred until the end of March 2021, whilst WG undertook a review of learner travel. He explained that there was however, a significant amount of work currently around contract management, to drive down costs

with the local authority re-tendering over 240 contracts whilst also looking at the wider domain around the use of council assets to help schools.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change stated that this had been a significant concern for a number of years and was raised constantly in the budget monitoring report. She noted the consultation reported back to Cabinet and the decision to defer this pending the review by the WG. This was why this had been put in as a one off pressure until Cabinet were able to review it again.

A Member also referred to page 39, ESF7 and raised concern again, something she did every year, about children receiving transport because there was no safe route to school, particularly areas where children were getting a bus because they did not have a small section of pavement, for example.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support assured Members that safe routes to school was something being looked at in the Directorate and wider across the organisation. In addition, the local authority was looking into learners not getting into their first choice of school and having to be transferred to other schools via school transport, putting additional pressure on that budget. A review carried out over the last year however indicated that the numbers not reaching their first choice were extremely low, less than 1%. He noted the particular pressure on Coity with regards to pupil admissions and hoped to address this through Band B proposals. Safe routes to school were being looked at and it was reaching within the thinking in learning travel.

A Member referred to page 39, ESF6 and explained his understanding was that the WG policy had very little flexibility in terms of pupil numbers when new schools were built. What conversations were being had between local authorities and WG to allow flexibility in future years and ensure that schools were still fit for purpose by the time the doors opened?

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support acknowledged that the local authority was bound by WG policy following the code and statutory guidance. The local authority was lucky to have a mature school modernisation team who were expert in dealing with the policy and delivering. One of the issues that had certainly been flagged up by Members was with regard to sustainably, making the schools large enough, so they coped with additional demand and the transitory nature of families moving. As well as communicating with WG officials, it had been discussed with the Association of Directors of Education in Wales and the Corporate Director – Education & Family Support was happy to raise this again with WG and provide an update.

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration explained that it was not just new schools that were not allowed to operate with spare capacity, but also existing schools. He would like to see spare capacity to cope with people who moved schools during term time but WG did not allow that flexibility currently.

A Member referred to page 41, ESF1 & 2 and asked whether the savings could realistically be achieved. He asked for reassurance in relation to health & safety on school transport and the need to be 100% sure it was mitigated, as this concerned him.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support agreed that health and safety was a top priority within the Directorate and across the organisation. He noted that both of those were currently red and was because neither had been taken forward by Cabinet, as previously discussed. He had been asked over the next couple of months, to look at whether mitigating measures could be put in place. If sufficient mitigating measures could not be put in place then those savings would not go ahead because health and safety was the top priority.

A Member expressed concern that this item had been on the MTFs for the last 3 years and the same concerns were raised every year. She asked why had the review not been done previously and why was it thought deliverable this year?

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support reassured Members. Firstly a review had been undertaken. The next couple of months would look at what had come out of the review and how some recommendations could be put into practice. Clearly one of the things the Local Authority was trying to do was to make sure, that all those were safe for learners to travel on stating that Members would expect assurance of that and he confirmed his full commitment, but clearly there were other ways of doing things that were equally as safe. The local authority was trying to look at different ways of doing things to provide the same level of health and safety for travellers whilst also making sure these were done within the budget envelope.

A Member referred to page 41, ESF 3 stating that EFS 2, 3, 4 and 6 made reference to vulnerable groups of children and felt that it was not going to be equal and fair. She felt that an equality impact assessment should have been done for each recommendation so that the impact could be understood. She also asked where was the children's rights assessment.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that all areas identified within the report, were challenging and was aiming to change practice in order to mitigate any risk to frontline delivery, wherever possible. This included changing practice, changing management, and the processes around supporting learners, so there was a very clear focus on not effecting learners who were benefitting from front line services. That was the guiding principle adopted, certainly within education and other directorates, but again it was difficult. In respect of equality impact assessments, these would be undertaken where required and the Corporate Director – Education & Family Support would be happy to talk through those with Members in due course.

The Member stated that she was really concerned about reducing services to the most vulnerable in the community. In terms of sustainability who was going to take the responsibilities on in an overstretched management structure. She acknowledged the pressures staff were under at the minute and did not think it helped talking about further cuts to their services.

A Member echoed the Member's concerns about the issues and to him the obvious solution was at SCH1. If schools were being asked to provide a 1% efficiency saving, should that saving not go to central services, so that central services were there to support the schools?

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support stated that he certainly understood the question but the challenge was that all were serving the same ecosystem. Schools faced tough decisions on a daily basis with regard to their budget, and certainly the local authority and central support services faced the same challenges. The local authority worked closely with the Schools Budget forum to make sure any changes in the budget did not adversely affect young people in anyway but it was difficult from a central services point of view. Bridgend ran a very lean central service despite the amount of money spent centrally, per learner, being below the Welsh average. The decision had been made over many years to prioritise school budgets and protect them and certainly over the next couple of years it was going to be a bumpy road for schools and for local authorities to maintain service delivery.

The Member stated that he was very aware of the lean team but it seemed a bit of an anathema, to take services away from that point and expect 56 individual schools to then try to take up the slack when they were under pressure, as well. What was the

purpose of the 1% saving efficiency if it was not to try and provide more central services to act more effectively to support schools. Could the Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explain where the £1million a year would go, if it is not for schools.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that it was about looking at the general budget position across the council so that it was fit for purpose. There were areas within both the Education & Family Support and Communities Directorate where there needed to be a one council approach. He was mindful of being one of several Directorates that were looking to support children and young people that ultimately needed to make sure the budget was a balanced one. That was a corporate responsibility, but as a Director he needed to make sure that that service delivery within his Directorate was effective as well.

A Member referred to page 41, ESF2 and asked for a figure on the number of services that would not have an escort on them. In relation to EFS7, the Member felt this should be reviewed in light of everything that had happened in 2020, and going forward into 2021. He would like to think that this was a saving, or cut being reconsidered in light of what was likely to be a really significant impact on pupils going forward.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained in regard to EFS2 that he did not have information to hand in relation to the actual number of routes and contracts, but was more than happy to find that out from the school transport team.

In regards to ESF7 he noted there were two issues. First of all the obvious impact of the pandemic had on young people and staff, which had been challenging. In addition the development and implementation phase of the new ALN and education & tribunal bill, to determine exactly what inclusion staff were needed, in situ, to deliver it. It would be the same team, but also working with partners across the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region and across CSC, to make sure each are supported from a business resilience point of view. Those proposals were not fully developed and would involve some delivery risk if they went ahead.

A Member also raised concern in relation to page 41, ESF2 the proposal to remove escorts on school transport, noting that whilst it had been stated the local authority did not have a statutory obligation, it had an obligation to keep those children safe whilst they were going to school and returning home.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support thanked the Member and noted she had provided expert contribution to this debate over the last year or so. He confirmed that there was no statutory requirement around this, but ultimately health and safety was a key area of concern, hence the reason it had been identified as a delivery risk if it went ahead. There were two issues, one that the safety of the learners was paramount and secondly what the local authority would need to do is ensure that it was fully following welsh government policy and guidance on this going forward.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change stated that she appreciated that everyone was asking questions about education and schools but the budget was wider than just education. If at the end of education scrutiny was minded to say, these should be removed, then Members needed to come to the next session with where they were going to put them back. For example, would some of the unpopular savings be transferred into Communities or Social Services & Wellbeing, because the budget had to balance, so what were the alternatives to what was being suggested.

A Member fully accepted and understood what the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change was saying but he totally disagreed with the word 'unpopular' when looking at EFS2 and driver safety. It was not unpopular, it was unsafe.

A Member asked whether it was possible where potential indicative savings for 2022-23 had been earmarked that they could be brought forward as alternatives to some of the decisions for 2021-22 and would that in affect balance the budget.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change stated that this was possible but did depend as some savings needed consultation or procurement so if they were deliverable from the 1st April yes, they could be brought forward.

A Member explained that in respect of vulnerable pupils and removing their home to school transport and assistance, this was provided for them, as any child with mobility issues that needed additional support, had this as part of getting themselves around. If maybe they had a car provided or a staff member that was there to support that child and they were responsible for transporting the child, so the Member did not understand why the Council was providing a service that essentially somebody in the community was already having the money to provide for themselves.

The Corporate Directorate – Education and Family Support explained that this was correct and that these were two separate issues. His understanding was that there was support given to families where there were mobility issues. With regards to learners in particular, a learner would only be in receipt of a local authority provided place, with regard to home to school travel, if it was clearly identified within that learners SEN statement or shortly their individual development plan. If it was not stipulated, there was no statutory requirement for the local authority to provide that.

A Member referred to Page 41, EFS4 in relation to Gypsy and Traveller learners and asked with the new structure being proposed how concerned was the Corporate Director – Education & Family Support about children slipping through the net and not receiving the education they deserved while mitigating any disruption with these children's education.

The Corporate Directorate – Education and Family Support explained that the number one concern was mitigating any impact on what any vulnerable group would perceive a service from. He explained that they had moved from the looked after children in education team and other supporting teams who supported vulnerable learners, into the vulnerable groups team. That team had evolved and had attracted additional resources to support a variety of groups of vulnerable learners and that was now called the education engagement team. One of the things that the team had been very effective in doing, was working far closer with schools on delivering this service, not least for those learners in school but also supporting their families, not just in the pandemic but also wider through the school year.

The Headteacher of Llangewydd Junior School and Vice-Chair of Schools Budget Forum explained that the inclusion and engagement team did run a lean service particularly in transport and admissions but never failed to deliver. He confirmed that he did not have any gypsy and travellers at the present time, but the school did have many vulnerable learners and anticipated producing around 25 to 28 individual development plans next year.

The Registered Representative – Church in Wales referred to page 41, EFS5 and noted there was again a reduction to Central South Consortium (CSC) of 1% and asked was it not time for Bridgend to give thought to coming out of CSC and using that money to provide in-house subject advisors.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that his view was very clear in regards to CSC and that the value for money from the region was good. He

felt the service provided was effective and certainly, in the main, was reflected in feedback from Headteacher colleagues. The local authority was contractually committed to working with CSC until September 2023. As far as the subject advisors were concerned, they had been called challenge advisors, and were now called improvement partners, and worked with the local authority and schools to help schools and support schools in challenging positions. They did have some subject advisors, notably around the sciences and maths, literacy and IT, so there was some function there, but it was limited and they would certainly not provide an in-house subject advisor team, if we were to move to that model.

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration agreed partly with what the Registered Representative – Church in Wales, had said in the loss of subject advisors and teacher centres, which had been a long-term trend in educational management. He expressed a need for more subject related advice from improvement partners and had initiated, with CSC, initiatives to build up teacher forums, which existed top down in core subjects, but only existed bottom up for other subjects and he would like to see those expanded. He suggested a pre-council meeting for all Members in respect of blended learning.

A Member referred to Page 41, EFS5 and stated that year on year there had been a cut to the consortium and was it sustainable going forward?

The Cabinet Member Education and Regeneration agreed that those cuts were not welcome, but CSC had found the cuts doable and could carry out most of their functions with those cuts.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support confirmed that it was challenging, but there had been lots of operational discussions and CSC were maintaining the process and the facilities to support schools. It was aligned with other local authorities.

A Member referred to Page 41, EFS6 and stated that this was an area of concern with the amount of savings or reductions that were listed, noting that the learning support team and governance support team, were effectively the same team. He asked what the impact would be with regards to governor support, school admission support and budget support acknowledging that school governors were volunteers and had large workloads.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support thanked the Member for his work with the Bridgend Governors Association. With regards to the team, they were two very small teams but were expert and supported schools to the hilt but it was a challenge and clearly this was indicated in the report. If there were further cuts to the team or if members of staff left and were not replaced, that this would be a challenge and it would impact on service delivery. In terms of school budgets, finance officers also supported schools with deficit budgets and this required additional workforce centrally to support schools through quite challenging times. While this was quite a small saving indicated it would be challenging as indicated by red to achieve.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support confirmed that he would amend the narrative in relation to Page 41, ESF4, so it read 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller'.

The Registered Representatives - Secondary School Sector referred to Page 41, EFS7 and whilst noting this was for 2022-23, asked what was the reasoning behind this being considered at the moment particular as the Corporate Director – Education and Family Support had said earlier, he did not want to have any impact on front line learners, which reducing this, clearly would.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support referred to the points that had been discussed several times, that all of the proposals were challenging and not easy. With regard to the following financial year it went back to two elements, firstly benefitting from economies of scale operating across the region, which the ALN Transformation Lead was working towards with other local authorities, and it helped both ways. This should draw upon the expertise of inclusion staff not just at Bridgend, but in the other four local authorities and vice versa, helping business resilience both ways. This was indicated in the MTFS as red as obviously there were challenges in proposing this and the narrative certainly backed that up. Ultimately this would be steered by what eventually came out of the ALN bill, as there would be statutory requirements in there for the local authority so that would shape the thinking going forward. In addition the local authority would need to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment before this proposal was implemented.

A Chairperson referred to Page 41, EFS8 and asked for more information on what the train of thought was here, as there was not a lot of information on there and a number of Directorates had already gone through staffing restructures.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support explained that when staff left the service they would not be replaced wherever possible, notwithstanding not increasing additional duties for other staff, but clearly it was important to look at alternative management structures if that opportunity presented itself.

A Member asked that consideration was given to a long term strategic vision before staff left in order to use their expertise to shape the future as opposed to wondering how things would be dealt with once they had left. In using their expertise it may actually result in additional savings being identified over the coming years which would help everything, including efficiency and the long-term sustainability of employment.

The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support stated that he had been charged to look at the longer-term vision by the Chief Executive and was very much focussed on the next month or so ahead, but agreed that staff would help shape the vision ahead as had been done with previous restructures as well.

A Member referred to Page 41, EFS8 and agreed with a previous Member in that the local authority could not keep losing staff and expecting less people to do the same work. In relation to Page 42, SCH1 the Member noted that whilst schools did a marvellous job, there was a disproportionate share to all other services. He suggested a 0.5% cut this year and a 0.5% cut next year, as schools had been warned up to fact that cuts were coming. He was disappointed to see there was not some sort of saving and sharing of the pain within schools this year.

The Cabinet Member Communities pointed out that this was not his area but he accepted the Members points and did not think any Councillors ever came on to the Council to force people into situations where they had to work harder for less and do more with less, but unfortunately that was the reality. The local authority had come through years of stringent austerity and had to live with a budget where money was finite and had to focus resources according to needs. There were no easy choices, it was a balance and if Members felt a cut was wrong in one area they then needed to suggest where else that cut could be made from.

The Leader made the point that there was much uncertainty at present and this was an indicative budget and strategy before Members. It was difficult to make accurate forecasts or predictions about the future of finance. There was a need to prepare budgets that reflected a scenario where the local authority made significant savings. It

was hoped that austerity had ended and would not restart but there was a need to plan for the worst.

A Member stated that there had been a lot of interesting debate about some cuts that when added up came to less than £0.5million. While he was cognisant of a previous comment, it seemed foolhardy to take out £100k and lose the valuable services to all schools for the sake of not implementing an efficiency saving.

A Member noted that if forward savings could be identified, why were those savings not being brought forward on-stream quicker as a way of balancing the budget.

The Leader stated that it would depend on the type of saving that had been made, stating that if the local authority was in a better financial position, then it was sensible not to make those reductions. There were some savings that needed to be made, and those could be brought forward. The Fit for the Future Budget consultation focused on different ways of providing services, as there had been a shift from face to face delivery to online service delivery. This could make significant savings and that was looking to be brought forward including savings on office accommodation costs, which was supported, as that was not having an impact on frontline service delivery, as there was public support for changing the way the local authority delivered some services.

The Chief Executive stated that he wanted to build on what the leader had said. He provided his assurance that in the main when savings were identified for future years, it was usually because there had been some analysis and recognition that either the process involved, perhaps to do with consultation or statutory processes, or indeed the capacity of the service did not allow for that saving to be brought forward. Sometimes it was because a contract or lease ended at a future date where it was known a saving could be made at that point, but not before. He agreed in principle, and stated that this could be looked at again but he wanted to reassure Members that one of the first places when seeking to make savings for the coming year was whether something could be brought forward or not. Often having done the detailed analysis there were good reasons why they could not.

A Member stated that the report referred to policy changes which included reducing services to the statutory minimum, as well as cutting some discretionary services, and asked which statutory services had the Cabinet already looked at, reducing to a minimum and which discretionary services had the Cabinet considered cutting to meet budgetary pressures. The report also stated there will be new pressures surrounding Covid-19 but that the Welsh Government (WG) would continue to provide funding for this, however if there was a shortfall in central funding would the local authority have to absorb this and what estimate had been given on the impact of this. Finally the report referred to the impact of additional WG legislative changes on the local authority e.g. Environment Act, the commitment to eradicate homelessness, the implications of the Local Government Act, etc. The Member asked if the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change expected this to be full funded by the WG and if not he felt a recommendation needed to be that the Committee and the Council push back on the WG to ensure that any additional legislation which came the Local Authority's way, did not place additional financial pressure on the Authority, without the consequential funding.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change explained that often the discretionary services were those that actually helped to reduce the demand on mandatory services. It was fair to say that every single service had been looked at and these were the proposals in front of Members. The Corporate Director – Education and Family Support had gone through some of the proposals, some of which were a reduction in statutory services. It was much more nuanced that this at the minimum

level. It was a little clearer in respect of Social Services and Wellbeing about the sort of levels but even then there were different ways of delivering services.

In terms of Covid-19 what was likely in the future was complete uncertainty. The local authority had been fortunate that the WG set up a hardship fund and had been successful at getting money from that, including loss of income claims, money for Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the possibility of some help on council tax, but that was yet to be determined. Homelessness had been supported up until now, but it was not clear what would happen next year, with WG officials being clear it would be a whole new budget round and resources.

Even though there had been a better settlement, the Local Authority still needed to be very careful, and not abandon principles or financial governance, just because it had been successful this year. Strong representations were always made regarding money to fund additional legislation. It was not always successful and sometimes it was not known how much some of the new legislative requirements were going to cost. The ALN Bill in particular, had much wider ramifications than anybody thought and certainly the new Homelessness Guidance, was likely to cost the Council a £2M pressure.

The Member thanked the Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change and stated that one of the recommendations coming out of the Committee should be to support Cabinet in writing to the WG to ensure that any additional legislation came with the consequential funding. Ultimately if it did not, the political choices which the Cabinet needed to make about statutory services or even discretionary services, would be all the more difficult.

The Leader thanked the Member for his support in terms of the point and the principle, which was a vital one if new responsibilities and statutory responsibilities were placed on the Local Authority that they were funded in full and that funding was a permanent increase in funding. Sometimes the Authority got short term temporary funding made available, but the responsibility was a permanent responsibility, cost, and pressure.

A Member referred to pages 24/25 4.10.1 and explained that the paragraph talked about an 'assumed Council tax increase of 3.9%', but the wording at the end of the paragraph to 4.11.1 stated 'the proposed Council Tax increase for 2021-22 onwards would remain at 4.5%.'

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change confirmed that she would check this.

A Member referred to page 28 4.14.1, in respect of 'Fit for the Future' and noted there had been a 58% reduction in responses this year. She did appreciate how difficult the year was, but she wanted to understand how the Council had ensured that the survey was completed across all economic groups.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change stated that it was hard to say as it had been an unprecedented year but the Local Authority had tried its best, to get to everyone normally reached. Every single group, as far as possible, was represented and the Communications Team had gone out of their way to make the survey available and to talk to people. It was clear that some of the face to face consultation could not happen and the number of contributors had been significantly lower. The responses had been verified and were statistically sound but it was hard to be sure it was completely representative of every single group. The Consultation Engagement and Equalities Manager was also the Equalities Officer and so was very conscious that consultation should not be just with people with IT access. The methodology was set out in the report and she felt Members would be satisfied that

every effort had been made and there were contributions from people who were not technology savvy. It was a statutory requirement but it had been an odd year.

The Leader explained that certainly there was some learning from the consultation on the budget but explained that the Local Authority had reached out to some new groups, which was to be welcomed. This would be built on next year and efforts would be redoubled, to reach groups who were digitally excluded, but some ways of consulting with people would be retained because some people had found it easier this year.

Communities

A Member referred to page 41, COM1 and noted that it was amber and the £300k cut to the service. He was not against the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process and it had worked well but there were many smaller clubs where it may not be appropriate. He felt that pushing ahead with the policy was wrong, where some clubs were concerned and in respect of the narrative which noted a 'reduction of grass cut areas etc.' he was concerned that the cut of £300k should not be there.

The Corporate Director – Communities explained the saving was in there as a potential saving reduction from transfers via the CAT process. It was voluntary and needed to have a very robust business plan process behind it, so there was assurance that the organisation taking on the responsibility had the ability to maintain the facility and that it was financially viable to ensure the vibrancy of that club going forward. It was not something that clubs would be mandated to do, but encouraged to do, should they have the right resources. In respect of narrative the amount of maintenance undertaken on children's play was not going to be reduced. There were some budgetary reductions about reducing the number of cuts to areas of grassland across the borough, but the local authority would ensure children's play areas were safe and fit to use as there was a duty of care to children for health and safety reasons for children's play.

The Head of Operations – Community Services updated Members that the CAT process was going well and there had been quite a lot of success. Nearly all of the bowls greens within the borough were now being maintained by the relevant clubs. A large amount of the £300k saving would be attributable to CAT and would be deliverable but some clubs would struggle, although the Local Authority would not go to full cost recovery as long as clubs were committed to the CAT process and every club in the borough had expressed an interest. It could be a challenge if some decided to pull away. One of the things that was approved in a previous Cabinet report was to sign off other saving measures as well and this included reviewing grass-cutting areas, making reductions there and also looking at children's play areas, although not reducing the quality, but potentially the quantity. £300k was a big saving to achieve but all the choices were difficult.

The Cabinet Member - Communities stated the decision to expand the CAT programme had not been taken lightly. The figure reflected there would not be a requirement to maintain playing fields to the standard that leagues and other organisations would need, as this would be down to the clubs and was a direct reflection of the policy, which he felt was right. There was a commitment from the Local Authority to support those clubs. The Cabinet Member Communities did not agree with removing the saving.

A Member referred to page 42, COM1 and asked whether Newbridge Fields was included and if so, how much of the £300k was attributable to Newbridge Fields as the site's complexity made it highly unlikely that it would be able to be addressed and achieved within a year.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained that in terms of the £300k this was a best estimate coupled with other savings in the section assuming everything

would CAT transfer in the financial year, although Newbridge Fields did not have to transfer in the coming year. Newbridge Fields was complex and a separate report had been commissioned to look at how this would fit together with the potential to have a joint body oversee the entire area and various ways it could potentially work as a CAT transfer or other options. In terms of exact figures for individual transfers, he did not have the information to hand, but could provide it later.

A Member, who was a Member of Bridgend Town Council asked for clarification in respect of CAT's as it had been suggested that Town Councils be invited to contribute and he felt very strongly against this.

The Cabinet Member Communities explained that this was not the case. Newbridge Fields was a complex issue. There were a number of organisations that had a vested interest in Newbridge Fields. Whether or not Bridgend Town Council wanted to be involved in a possible management committee, was for them to decide. He suggested waiting until the consultants had done their work and produced a report and the Local Authority would then look to consult with those that required consultation.

A Member also stated that Newbridge Fields was not only playing fields but also a public open space. It was also the flood plain in Bridgend and was the protection for the Town of Bridgend. She again asked how much of the £300k was attributed to Newbridge Fields.

The Cabinet Member Communities agreed this was very complex and a way had to be found to move forward on that. In respect of the £300k Officers were not in a position to give a definite answer but promised to come back and provide an answer in the written form.

A Member referred to page 42, COM1 and asked for clarity where it said reduction of grass cut areas and in respect of play areas. She asked if there was a statutory duty to supply play areas and equipment for children.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained in relation grass cut areas, in the current financial year, there had been a reduction in frequency made, so less cuts than in previous years. It was not felt there could be a further reduction in frequency or there was the potential for high levels of complaints. It was now about looking at a reduction in areas cut, choosing areas that would no longer be cut, and could be signed off by the Cabinet Member – Communities. In respect of the Play areas, it was not about reducing the quality but about reducing the quantity, so identifying some that potentially may not be used anymore. It was a statutory duty, and there was still a need to make sure efficiency was there but if savings were to be made, it would be a mixture of those things.

The Member stated she felt careful consideration was needed in closing any play areas.

The Corporate Director – Communities stated that the Local Authority would not be getting anywhere near the position where it would be below the statutory requirement. What needed to be done was a sensible look at some of the older or less used play areas where there would not be significant impact if they were removed. There was a need to look at play areas making sure they were suitable for a wide range of age groups, had good equipment and were looked after. For children, play was not just about ensuring there was equipment, play was about ensuring there was maintained spaces to kick a ball, run around, safe places for children to play which did not necessarily have to include formalised equipment.

A Member stated in regard to open space provision the last open space play audit identified that there was insufficient local play area space in most wards in the borough.

A Member stated that in terms of grass cutting and weed spraying, she had asked previously if Town and Community Councils could be provided with the cost of extra grass cutting and weed spraying, if they wished to pursue it.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained that many Town and Community Councils did undertake additional grass cutting and activities of that nature. Normally those Community or Town Councils would undertake that by contractual arrangement themselves or some might even employ their own staff. He asked that Members link in with the Authority so additional grass cuts could be coordinated and happen in-between the cuts that were contractually undertaken.

The Chairperson suggested that the Head of Operations – Community Services send the names of the contacts to the Member.

A Member stated that after some mixed messages there seemed to be agreement that the number of children's play areas would be reduced. He asked when that exercise would take place, decisions made and would Town and Community Councils have time to evaluate and look at what they could potentially save. In relation to Newbridge Fields the issue ran in line with Maesteg Welfare Park. There had been some initial consultation but no costings had been available. If there was a saving, how much was that saving as this reflected in the cost of running the asset. He noted that Town and Community Councils needed to know what was being faced prior to setting their budgets so that they could consider and possibly include in their budgets going forward.

The Corporate Director – Communities explained it was important to note the commitment to have great children's play across the borough but the Local Authority needed to look at those spaces and remove any that didn't function as well whilst looking at the impact of that on the Borough. A review was being undertaken with the Cabinet Member and wider team and she felt there would be conversations to be had around narrative when those to be reviewed were identified. With regard to the costings of CAT transfers this was a critical part about organisations and clubs taking on the ownership of bowling greens, parks, playing fields and this would be supplied as part of that CAT transfer and business case that they prepared.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained that he was a little surprised at the comment in relation to the CAT costings, because the CAT process had got a lot slicker with many underway and the Community Asset Transfer Officer had been very good at supplying all CAT costings including utility costs, breakdowns of different pavilions, etc. In addition costs for maintaining pitches, etc., had previously been published so all that information could be supplied in due course.

The Member stated that he would very much like to see the overall of running Maesteg Welfare Park and Newbridge fields.

The Corporate Director – Communities confirmed that was something that could be provided.

The Interim Chief Officer Finance, Performance and Change explained in regard to Town and Community Council (TCC) budgets, there was obviously a timetabling issue which had never really been solved. If TCC's worked in advance with the Head of Operations – Community Services about what they wanted to do, it was incumbent on them to set the precept accordingly. It wasn't necessarily dependant on the Council's budget. The difficulty was that if TCC's raised the precept to do the work that had been

removed as a saving in the MTFs then the resident was still paying the same amount in council tax, because regardless of who did what, it was still going to cost the resident.

A Member referred to the closure of play areas and suggested that before any closures took place the Local Authority should survey local residents to see what they wanted.

The Corporate Director - Communities noted that this was something that could be considered when looking at those areas.

A Member referred to a WG survey carried out in 2019, which stipulated no one on any estate, should be more than 500m from a playground, or a play area and felt this report should be reviewed.

The Corporate Director – Communities noted that this was a good point and something to be considered during the review.

A Member referred to page 43, COM2 and stated that she was really concerned about the relocation of the Community Recycling Centre to Pyle. It was not about the relocation, but the lack of engagement, especially with the School. She explained that local Members were informed at the time of the consultation that all access would be taken via the A48. Pyle and Kenfig Hill had significant traffic issues, especially around the industrial estate and garden centre.

The Corporate Director – Communities acknowledged that this was something that needed to be addressed on the estate. There was lot of traffic movement in and out of the garden centre and estate and there were some traffic management works being undertaken to improve the junction which was an important part of the recycling centre relocation. The junction needed to be looked at to allow traffic to be managed in a more effective way whilst considering the speed the traffic moved through the site. It was about more efficient use of the Pyle centre, and ensuring improved recycling rates and sustainability going forward.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained he could not comment specifically on the point about the school. Full planning permission had been granted and all of the appropriate legal processes were undertaken at the time including requirements for statutory consultations. The works on the junction had been tendered recently had prices had been received back for improvement works, hence the green saving, evidenced on the MTFs proposal as the site was being constructed. In terms of the consultation period, he could go back and confirm exactly what was done, but this was historical, the planning stage had passed and permission had been granted some time ago.

The Member thanked the Officers for their comments but felt there would be significant public unrest due to concerns that they had not been consulted with. She did not feel the actual engagement had been good. Furthermore, she felt this was being done to save £60k worth of money.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained that he appreciated the concerns but in relation to the comment about the £60k saving, it wasn't just about a £60k saving, it was about an improved facility, compared to Stormy Down. There was no re-use shop there and this site would have a re-use shop, which would improve not just recycling, but re-use facilities, so would be a better site benefitting users.

A Member asked for reassurance that there would be some meaningful consultation in respect of play areas and asked for clarification in respect of grass cutting at Council owned cemeteries. In addition, he was concerned that if grass cutting moved to TCC's

there would be an uncoordinated approach which could have an effect on wildlife and ecosystems and hoped there would be advice given on the impact of overzealous grass cutting.

The Corporate Director explained she was committed to looking across children's play, mitigating any excessive community impact but admitted that she did not think that any children's play would have no community impact, but felt it would be prudent to have conversations with the community as and when those decisions were reached.

The Head of Operations – Community Services explained briefly in respect of grass cutting, that he didn't expect overzealous grass cutting to be an issue. He didn't intend for any areas that were regularly cut, to be cut more frequently. If they were, they were certainly not areas that were so unkempt that would lead to ecology and wildlife living there. He noted more naturalised areas were likely to be created which would be an improvement from an ecology perspective. In respect of grass cutting at Council owned cemeteries, the cut to the grass cutting budget was for open space grass cutting, so the cemetery budget would not be affected.

It was agreed that the Cabinet Member - Communities, Corporate Director - Communities, and Head of Operations - Community Services would attend the meeting the next day for the remainder of Members' questions regarding Communities Directorate savings proposals.

201. URGENT ITEMS

None.