

Overview and Scrutiny Committees' comments and Recommendations on the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-23 to 2025-26

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - 19 January 2022

Chief Executive's Directorate and Council Wide:

Recommendations:

1. The Committee recommended that the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Corporate Plan be reviewed and adjusted based upon the volatility of the funding, the difficulties of financial planning on a 3 to 5 year cycle and the need to be prudent moving forward.
2. The Committee recommended a corporate overview of procurement and tendering process be undertaken and looks at added liabilities to the Authority for staffing costs, which would include National Insurance contributions, national pay / wage increases, etc.
3. The Committee requested clarification whether the requirement for the Authority to meet increased National Insurance contributions for staff in commissioned services is from employment law or from within the terms of the contracts.
4. The Committee recommended that the Authority lobbies Welsh Government and UK Government for consequential funding for the additional requirements placed upon Local Authorities from legislative and regulatory pressures, including those relating to: the Additional Learning Needs Act, the Environmental (Wales) Act 2016, the Welsh Government's commitment to eradicate homelessness, local authorities' responsibilities in respect of responding to climate change and meeting net zero carbon targets, the implications of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, etc. and asks Welsh Government to identify what within core funding covers these additional responsibilities. The Committee also requested an itemised breakdown of how much the additional legislative / regulatory commitments such as Teachers' Pay, NI Contributions, Real Living Wage, etc, take out of the £19.6 Million uplift in funding, in order to receive an accurate indication of the remainder of the 9.2% budget settlement increase.
5. The Committee recommended that Cabinet write to Welsh Government urging them to set a multi year Medium Term financial Strategy budget settlement cycle of 3 or 5 years.
6. In respect of budget pressure CEX1, the Committee recommended consideration be given to continuing to reduce the cost of postage centrally due to the increase in digital service provision, and requested the savings being made by individual Directorates be identified.

7. In respect of budget pressure CW1, the Committee recommended that the Cabinet requests clarity on the outcome of the consultation undertaken upon Fire and Rescue Service precept / funding.
8. In respect of budget pressure CW3, the Committee expressed concern about whether the £1M would be sufficient to meet the range of potential services it may need to support, given the extent of previous claims from the Welsh Government Hardship Fund by such services e.g., schools, homelessness, etc. and requested itemisation of what the pressure is to support following the ending of the Welsh Government hardship fund.

Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 – 20 January 2022

Education and Family Support Directorate and Schools:

Recommendations:

1. The Committee supported the COSC recommendation made on 19 January 2022 for a robust review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Corporate Plan to be undertaken, as they were planned prior to the pandemic. The Committee requested that Cabinet be mindful of the consequences of the pandemic impact including learning catch up, the mental health of children and safeguarding issues when looking at this review, and the impact of potential future reductions on schools and teaching.
2. In relation to the indicative Budget Reduction SCH1 of 1% for 2023-24 to 2025-26, the Committee recommended that the Cabinet lobby Welsh Government regarding the detrimental effect Covid has had on children and their learning and the need to start examining and discussing funding for schools looking ahead, as Wales has the lowest funding per pupil in the UK and Bridgend is lower than some other Welsh Authorities, and the need to try to protect children's learning from future savings that could potentially impact on the effectiveness of teaching.
3. The Committee recognised the need to be able to plan ahead for future years in the MTFs and supported the recommendation proposed by COSC on 19 January 2022, that Cabinet write to Welsh Government urging them to set a multi year Medium Term financial Strategy budget settlement cycle of 3 or 5 years
4. The Committee recommended that consideration be given to the cost of living crisis to try to keep any future Council Tax increase to as minimal as possible
5. In relation to budget pressure EFS6, the Committee recommended that the Authority continue to lobby Welsh Government for the awaited WG review of learner transport, in order to progress the outcome relating to this pressure for home to school transport.

Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2 – 21 January 2022

Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate:

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.
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.

Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 – 24 January 2022

Communities Directorate:

Recommendations:

1. The Committee requested a written breakdown of the list of Community Asset Transfers that had taken place to date with the maintenance costs per site to identify the savings.
 2. The Committee welcomed that a report would be prepared to Cabinet upon the Community Asset Transfers, including an update upon those community facilities clubs had not expressed an interest in transferring.
 3. The Committee welcomed the 9.2% uplift in the settlement from Welsh Government but is disheartened that savings are still proposed to the Communities Directorate particularly the Strategic Regeneration Fund, because of its importance for future generations. The Committee recommends that any reductions in the Communities Directorate are the last resort and that the Strategic Regeneration Fund budget particularly is protected as much as possible from reduction, as a priority from the list of Communities Directorate proposed reductions. (Budget reduction proposals, particularly COM1)
 4. In relation to budget pressure COM1, COM2 and COM3, the Committee requested information be provided regarding increased tonnages for kitchen waste, blue bag waste and street litter and the percentage increases in respect of each.
 5. The Committee recommended that Cabinet examine all discretionary services to ensure they are all achieving value for money for the local authority.
-