

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 - MONDAY, 24 JANUARY 2022

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3
HELD IN REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON MONDAY, 24 JANUARY 2022 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor JPD Blundell – Chairperson

N Clarke	P Davies	DK Edwards	DRW Lewis
JR McCarthy	JC Spanswick	RME Stirman	G Thomas
LM Walters	A Williams	JE Williams	

Apologies for Absence

DG Howells and RMI Shaw

Officers:

Lucy Beard	Scrutiny Officer
Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Andrew Rees	Democratic Services Officer - Committees

Invitees:

Victoria Adams	Interim Finance Manager – Budget Management: Communities, Education and Family Support
Councillor Stuart Baldwin	Cabinet Member Communities
Councillor Huw David	Leader
Deborah Exton	Deputy Head of Finance
Carys Lord	Chief Officer - Finance, Performance & Change
Janine Nightingale	Corporate Director - Communities
Councillor Dhanisha Patel	Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations
Mark Shephard	Chief Executive
Councillor Charles Smith	Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration
Councillor Hywel Williams	Deputy Leader

142. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

143. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 on 4 October 2021 be approved as a true and accurate Record.

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

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change presented a summary of the report, the purpose of which was to present the Committee with the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-23 to 2025-26, 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 2022-2026 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2022-23.

The Chair thanked the Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change and Members asked the following questions:

A Member referred to the anticipated saving of £300k from transferring responsibility for the management of assets, predominantly outdoor sports related playing fields and pavilions, to Town and Community Councils or community clubs and groups under the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) Programme and asked whether the Committee could be provided with the detail of the savings made by the transfers per site.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee that the predicated savings of £300k in 2021-22 had primarily been met by not funding the seasonal staff as the facilities had been transferred as part of the CAT process, and during the pandemic so some facilities were not operating at that time. With regard to detail behind the CAT Programme requested by the Member, she advised that she could provide the detail in a future report and provided assurance that as of November 2021, 19 facilities had been transferred under the CAT Programme, 10 of those to bowls clubs and 9 being long-term CAT agreements. The maintenance cost per bowling green per year was £13.5k, the full year effect of the transfer would be £151k, dependent on when the transfer took place, so from 2022-23 full year savings should be made. There were also an additional 2 bowling greens at Griffin Park coming forward to be transferred to Porthcawl Town Council and they would be included on top of that saving next year. There were also 9 long term CATS of different clubs across the Borough and the estimated saving of those were circa £65k dependant upon how many facilities they have, whether they are rugby pitches, football pitches, whether there are pavilions etc. the full year effect as of November 2021 was £215k.

The Corporate Director - Communities explained that as of then and moving forwards into 2022-23, there were an additional 10 sports clubs, that were in the process of transferring out, and as part of the Scrutiny discussions they were looking at whether they could do short term tenancies at will in the meantime in order to transfer the facility quicker than the full term CAT transfer, because the lease agreements take much longer to achieve. The CAT transfers were still being done in the background, but some Clubs had the benefit of that short term tenancy at will. Of the 10 additional sports clubs being worked upon, and depending upon the number and type of pitches they have in that breakdown, it was estimated the possibility of another £70k to £100k

Heads of Terms were currently being prepared for 3 rugby clubs to self-manage their pitches, saving circa £20k, while 7 Town and Community Councils were currently looking to progress 8 playing fields and some pavilions, some of which was hoped to be finalised by the 31 March 2022 and could see savings of up to £30k from those facilities. The potential full year effect of those additional facilities transfers of a further £146k applied to the savings done in the current year, could be looking at over the target of £300k. The CAT Programme was nearing the end with a total of circa over 40 facilities being transferred by the next year and would deliver £300k of recurrent savings to the Council and protect community sport.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee that a different approach was needed for the three major parks at Maesteg Welfare Park, Newbridge Fields, Bridgend and the Planka, Nantymoel due to the complex use pattern and number of clubs using those facilities. A review of those facilities was taking place, and proposals would be brought forward on how they could be managed going forward. She also advised that some joint investment is made in facilities from the capital allocation of £1M made in 2019 to enable clubs to make pitch and drainage improvements. To date, £628k had been invested in grants to clubs for capital improvements to facilities, with around £372k available in 2022-23 for joint investment going forward. It was important that the facilities were maintained for community sport going forward, clubs had welcomed participation to get better facilities. As things stood the CAT Programme had been successful so far and she thanked the Team under the leadership of the

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Community Asset Transfer Officer for the pragmatic approach to delivering the Programme, enabling year on year savings, and ensuring community sport in the County Borough.

A Member referred to the increased settlement of 9.2% and asked what the actual percentage is available to be spent by the Council as members of the public believe this is available money.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change informed the Committee that there were significant pressures which the Council was required to meet in relation to the National Insurance increase, fully funding the pay award, which for the current year had not been settled and paying the Real Living Wage for social care, to include staff working in the independent sector where the Council commissioned that service, estimated to be £2.5M. She stated there were also significant cost pressures within the current budget for this year, in relation to home to school transport and increased costs in relation to waste disposal.

The Chief Executive advised of the need to be careful of the 9.2% increase in the settlement, with inflation being over 5%. The Welsh Government hardship fund would end on 31 March 2022 and the Council would therefore need to fund the additional pressures in social care, early help, and homelessness. He stated that while the settlement was more generous than had been seen for a decade, it recognised the increased cost of living and a 0% increase in Council Tax was proposed, with very few service cuts proposed.

A Member stressed the need for accuracy in reporting and requested a breakdown of the sites along with the annual maintenance costs which had transferred under the CAT Programme, to ensure there was no double counting.

A Member stated that some clubs were unable to enter into a Community Asset transfer due to land use issues and needed to be considered as special cases.

The Corporate Director - Communities agreed to provide the Committee Member with a list of sites transferred along with the annual maintenance costs. She assured the Committee that double counting had not occurred.

A Member referred to the Directorate having been protected from budget reductions due to the better than anticipated budget settlement and asked what budget pressures, efficiency savings or cuts had been rejected or deferred to future years. He stated that the Communities Directorate and public realm had taken the brunt of the cuts to protect education and social services over the years, and that local government was being asked to do more due to regulatory and legislative changes and under pressure to deliver frontline services and asked which services in the Directorate were statutory and which were discretionary.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee that most services in the Directorate which are frontline, including roads, waste, health and safety through the corporate landlord, the majority of the work of the Regeneration Team with the exception of listed buildings and the work of the Economic Development Team were not statutory obligations. However, the work of those services was important to deliver well-being objectives and to drive the regeneration and recovery of the economy of Bridgend. She stated that the Directorate's budget is £29M, £19M of which could not be changed as it covered highways and waste services. The remaining £10M of the budget was for the delivery of the majority of the Directorate's services, with the cost of delivering regeneration and economic development being less than £1M to deliver annually, but they brought in a tremendous amount of capital via grant funding. The current Capital

Programme, being delivered was £53M of work on site, of which £35M grant funding had been secured by that team and doesn't include currently preparing Levelling Up Funding bids of circa £40M for the Penprysg Bridge and work to the Grand Pavilion, Porthcawl. Importantly work was also ongoing by the Team in Towns and Valleys through the Transforming Towns Grant Funding, operated via Welsh Government and in the last year grants of £1.6M attained for retail establishments in town centres. Over £600k had been spent on 88 commercial properties throughout the Borough during the pandemic getting them Covid ready.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee that whilst the economic development and regeneration teams were not statutory functions, the work they do is of enormous importance to the Borough. She stated that the Directorate is very lean and needs to work smarter and collaborate regionally with the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal. She also advised that there was a need to look at other ways of working and she did not want to make future cuts or savings in regeneration or economic development. Savings may have to be made and it was important that it did not impact on quality, delivery and on the economic development agenda.

The Cabinet Member for Communities informed the Committee that the savings made should be identified as cuts which have had to be made. He stated that were it not for regeneration and economic development, schemes such as the Maesteg Town Hall, the transformation of the former McDonalds building, the levelling up bids and work to sea defences at Porthcawl and Salt Lake car park would not be delivered. He also stated that non-statutory services are equally important to the public and that substantial funding is brought in through the work of the Cardiff Capital Region City deal and employment programmes which have been secured through grant funding helping people back into employment through non-statutory provision.

A Member of the Committee asked whether with additional burdens being placed on local government to do increasingly more, should these obligations sit with another level of government and had there been any pushback on potentially receiving additional funding from Welsh Government to deliver these services, rather than relying on the settlement to deliver discretionary services.

The Cabinet Member for Communities informed the Committee that the Council did not solely rely on the settlement to fund non-statutory provision, a lot of the funding was secured from grant funding through a number of sources, and an element of the settlement provided match funding for projects. He advised that for the forthcoming year the Council had been sheltered from having to make cuts due to the better settlement. He added that due to the end of European funding, alternatives and partnerships were being looked at to secure external funding such as the Shared Prosperity Fund to continue with projects to get people back into employment and for landmark buildings. He also referred the Committee to continued budget pressures and the proposal to freeze Council Tax.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration echoed the comments of the Cabinet Member for Communities and referred to partnership arrangements for regeneration projects like the 21st Century Schools Programme delivered with partners, including Welsh Government, Registered Social Landlords and Town and Community Councils. There was also the multiplier effect of projects to consider where an investment of thousands could deliver a return of millions. He concluded that the ambitions of the Cabinet are costed and put forward in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee there was place for both regional and local decisions. The Authority was moving towards a Corporate Joint

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Committee structure with regional governance for strategic transportation and planning and work was progressing on delivering the Porthcawl metro link to connect with Bridgend. Other regional projects included ultra-low emission vehicle charging infrastructure in car parks and the housing viability fund. Locally, projects included the Cosy Corner redevelopment and achieving net zero carbon by 2030 across the Council's services. In another local project, the Council was working with Bridgend College to bring a new campus into the town centre of Bridgend to drive footfall. She explained the importance of continuing to work regionally to ensure partnership and economic development benefits all.

The Chief Executive advised the Committee that the Council operates as one Council and that the Communities Directorate contributes towards getting people back into work which had a direct impact on Council Tax reduction and benefits.

The Leader advised that a distinction should not be made between discretionary and statutory services, and he highlighted the example of Maesteg Town Hall, which is a regeneration project, but the Council also has statutory responsibilities as it is a listed building, and it includes library provision. He stated that the Penprysg bridge whilst being a regeneration project is also fulfilling the Council's statutory transport responsibilities. The Council had a statutory duty as the Strategic Housing Authority to deliver new homes in partnership with registered social landlords.

A Member questioned what would happen to sports clubs and to facilities who which had not shown an interest in the CAT process so far.

The Leader advised the Committee of a commitment to bring a report to a future meeting of Cabinet upon that process.

A Member of the Committee referred to Table 6 in the report which showed an increase of 4% in the budget for Education and Family Support while the Communities Directorate had an increase of 2% and expressed concern that the Directorate did not get the same increases as other Directorates. The capital investment into public realm was welcomed, but revenue funding was required for maintenance, and he questioned the one Council approach, when these were the services which were front facing.

The Chief Officer - Finance Performance and Change informed the Committee that when the settlement was known, the Welsh Government had made some assumptions including that the Council would fund: the real living wage; legislative requirements such as additional learning needs; supporting Social Services, and funding teachers' pay.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that the Directorate had made a large amount of savings each year, however the Council operates as one and budgeted that way. She explained there were budget pressures due to the increase in waste disposal costs because of increased tonnage and the uplift in National Insurance, while savings still needed to be made.

The Leader advised that many of the savings were necessary due to new statutory requirements for additional learning needs due to an increase in the number of children locally whose needs had to be met. The Council had made a commitment to pay the real living wage for social care staff, including those in commissioned services, as both a Council and Welsh Government Policy.

A Member referred to budget pressures COM 1 to 3 regarding increased disposal costs for increased kitchen waste, blue bag waste and street litter and asked how the increases were calculated, monitored and how the budget pressure figures had been calculated.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that the pandemic had seen an increase in the tonnage of kitchen waste being collected from households due to more people working from home and a change in shopping habits. An increase in residual waste, which could not be recycled had also been experienced. There had also been an increase in waste being collected from bins in parks and beauty spots, due to people exercising more during the pandemic. More homes were being built in the Borough which also contributed to an increase in tonnage collected, however people were recycling more, which could reduce when people return to their place of work in future blended working arrangements. She advised that the exact tonnage collected was known as it had to be reported to the Welsh Government as part of recycling targets and a watching brief would be kept on the exact quantum of tonnage collected going forward.

A Member referred to budget pressure COM 1 regarding increased disposal costs due to increased kitchen tonnages being collected and questioned whether the increase in food waste and the electricity generated at the anaerobic digestion plant at Stormy Down could be used to offset costs from Kier, due to more electricity being generated.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that she would look at this suggestion. She stated that the anaerobic digestion facility is important towards contributing to the net zero carbon target by 2030. She added that one of the Recommendations of the Budget Research and Evaluation Panel was to review the mechanism for collecting food waste and a change in the type of bags used could offset some of the cost of the tonnage and make savings.

A Member of the Committee referred to the green food waste bags having to be emptied at Stormy Down to avoid clogging the machinery and that residents found that the bags fell apart. They asked whether plastic or paper food waste bags could be considered, which could result in the budget pressure changing from red to green.

The Corporate Director - Communities clarified that one of the proposed savings was to change the food waste bags to another source as the operatives at the plant had to remove the food waste from the bags as they caused issues with the machinery. Bio-degradable bags would be removed from April in consultation with the facility at Stormy Down and a revised solution considered.

A Member referred to budget pressure COM 2 regarding increased disposal costs due to increased blue bag waste being collected and asked by how much tonnage had increased.

The Corporate Director - Communities responded that pre-pandemic many people were out at work in the day and children were at school, but with working from home and home schooling, along with an uplift in the population of the Borough with the development of new housing, the amount of residual waste collected in blue bags had increased. She confirmed that there is a limit on 2 blue bags per household per collection. The Council was achieving over 70% recycling. She stated that she could confirm the exact tonnage showing the monthly increase of blue bag waste during the pandemic.

A Member asked whether an uplift in the tonnage collected due to new homes being built would be included in the waste contract.

The Corporate Director - Communities explained that there is an uplift in the contract due to new homes being built, however the increase in new homes had exceeded that which was built into the contract. She advised that 5 or 6 large housing sites had been

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identified in the Local Development Plan, which would put pressure not only on the waste collection service, but also on roads, schools, and social services.

A Member commented that the increased tonnage of waste collected would need to be included in the new waste contract.

A Member referred to the budget reduction proposals and specifically COM1, the proposed reduction to the Strategic Regeneration Fund of £299k from the budget over two years and asked which projects could be put at risk.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee that it was proposed to remove £20k from the budget in the coming year and in the following year to remove £270k from the budget, though its status was flagged as red as at this stage it was something that the Council may not wish to do. She stated that it would not affect current projects but would impact schemes in future years. She informed the Committee that very few grant schemes come fully funded and there is always an element of match funding and that the value of the land can be put up as match funding. She stated that she would want to protect that fund as it gave the Council the ability to undertake feasibility studies.

A Member asked whether the budget reduction proposal would place the Bridgend Town Centre Masterplan at risk and also place the projects at risk.

The Corporate Director - Communities stated that at this stage some of the schemes within the Masterplan were safe in that Officers from Regeneration were working on Bridgend College moving into a new building on Cheapside, with Transforming Towns Funding to acquire the police station. Officers were also working with Network Rail at better integration between the railway station and bus station. She stated that most of the match funding for schemes would come from the Capital Programme and not from the Strategic Regeneration Fund. She advised that a report would be presented to a future meeting of the Committee on the funding mechanisms for schemes.

The Chief Officer - Finance Performance and Change advised that the Committee of the county wide fund of £250k per year to fund corporate feasibility and she assured the Committee of the availability of other money being available to fund some of the work.

A Member of the Committee stated that a £270k saving would send out the wrong message to potential future investment and should be removed as a budget reduction proposal.

A Member of the Committee referred to the healthy budget settlement awarded to the Council and asked which budget reduction proposals had been removed or deferred to future years as it is incumbent to find other areas to balance the budget.

The Chief Officer - Finance Performance and Change advised that due to the better than anticipated settlement, it had been possible to reduce some of the savings expected of the Directorate.

A Member of the Committee commented that the Council could be severely disadvantaged if it cut regeneration funding when competing against other local authorities for investment.

The Leader responded that core funding for the Regeneration Team would continue and that a corporate fund would be available which could be accessed by Regeneration. He stated that other funding was available to the Council and that funding had been secured for the Penprysg Bridge and Porthcawl metro link from the Cardiff Capital Region. He

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hoped that as other funding sources became available, then the Council would not be impacted upon.

The Deputy Leader advised that the budget reduction proposals were not set in stone and could be reversed by an uplift in Council Tax, but it would not have an effect on the coming year's budget.

A Member of the Committee stated that on the presumption there would be a 4.5% increase in Council Tax in future years, the budget reduction proposal for the Strategic Regeneration Fund should not be included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

The Deputy Leader advised that the figures for the following year were indicative, and the budget had yet to be balanced.

A Member of the Committee referred to budget reduction proposal COM2 - Cessation of Tourism contract with AMA Associates, an external Public Relations Company who promote Bridgend with a range of publishers and asked whether the County Borough is advertised at motorway services and does economic development deal with tourism.

A Member of the Committee asked whether the Council had a Tourism Department.

The Cabinet Member for Communities informed the Committee the Council does not have a Tourism Department and to have one would result in an increase in Council Tax to fund the service. He advised that the team within the Communities Directorate were doing an excellent job with the resources that they had.

The Leader differentiated between supporting tourism and supporting tourism marketing and highlighted recent tourism examples within the County Borough, the development of the Water sports facility at Porthcawl and the Council being the host authority for the Valleys Regional Park. And that Bryngarw Park had seen a record number of visitors. He stated that the Council had shifted from having staffed tourism centres to using online platforms for promotion and that there is a thriving tourism sector which would see the redevelopment of Maesteg Town Hall and also plans for a new hotel.

A Member referred to budget reduction proposal COM3 - Change the composition of Household Food Waste bags and asked why its status was red, given that it was intended to change the bags in April.

The Corporate Director - Communities advised that its status was more amber at that time, however a number of options were being examined with the plant at Stormy Down to select the most appropriate type of bag to be used.

A Member referred to budget reduction proposal COM4 - Remove Business in Focus from running Enterprise Centres in Bridgend and asked what the vacancy rates were.

The Corporate Director - Communities informed the Committee of the high number of vacancy rates in Corporate Landlord which had been discussed with Corporate Management Board and Human Resources and that there was a plan to recruit temporary support for that service. It would put some pressure on the service, but in the long term it was hoped to resolve that. She stated that Business in Focus had assisted with the Enterprise Centres, but it was felt there was little value in continuing with that contract.

A Member referred to budget reduction proposal COM5 - Commercially let a wing of Ravens Court to a partner organisation or business and asked whether the Council

received an income for one of the wings being used as a vaccination centre and whether consideration had been given to selling the building.

The Corporate Director - Communities stated that the Council did receive an income from rental and for the cost of utilities from the Health Board for the use of a wing as a vaccination centre. A decision on whether to sell the building had yet to be made due to the blended working project. A whole range of options could be considered such as commercially letting out three wings, while the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub remaining in the building.

The Leader commented on the flexibility of the layout of the building so that the building could be used by different tenants. He clarified that the Health Board would continue to be offered the building due to the importance of the vaccination programme.

The Chairperson advised that Members of the Committee who wanted to ask questions had all spoken, so as there were no further questions for the invitees, thanked the invitees for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Following consideration of the report and appendices, the Committee made the following Recommendations for consolidation and inclusion in the report to Cabinet on the draft MTFs, including the proposed budget pressures and budget reduction proposals within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee, as part of the budget consultation process:

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 that 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.

145. URGENT ITEMS

None

The meeting closed at 12:14