

COMMUNITIES, HOMES & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

FRIDAY, 26 JANUARY 2024

PRESENT: Councillor D.M. Cundy (Chair)

Councillors (In Person):

B.W. Jones T. Davies J.K. Howell M. Palfreman

Councillors (Virtually):

K.V. Broom W.R.A. Davies H.L. Davies D. Owen
H.B. Shepardson

Also in attendance (In Person):

Councillor A. Lenny – Cabinet Member for Resources

Also in attendance (Virtually):

Councillor A. Davies – Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs, Community Cohesion and Planning Policy

Councillor L. Evans – Cabinet Member for Homes and Deputy Leader

Also Present (In Person):

R. Griffiths, Head of Place and Sustainability
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services
J. Fearn, Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects
I. Jones, Head of Leisure
I.R. Llewelyn, Forward Planning Manager
G. Williams, Team Leader
D. Hall-Jones, Member Support Officer
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

Also Present (Virtually):

J. Morgan, Head of Housing and Public Protection
A. Thomas, Group Accountant
G. Ayers, Corporate Policy and Partnership Manager
M. Runeckles, Members Support Officer

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 2.00 - 3.20 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor B. Davies, R. Evans and R. Sparks.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS INCLUDING ANY PARTY WHIPS ISSUED IN RELATION TO ANY AGENDA ITEM

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Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

Councillor	Minute No (s)	Nature of Interest
H. Shepardson	4 – Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2023/24 – 2025/26	Ticket Holder for the car parks within the Millennium Coastal Park and Season Ticket Holder for Pembrey Country Park
K. Broom	7 – Revised Carmarthenshire Local Development Plan 2018-2033 – Integrated Sustainability Assessment and Habitat Regulations Assessment (Including Addendums) – Further Consultation	Husband is employed by Natural Resources Wales

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2024/25 to 2026/27

(NOTE: Councillor H. Shepardson, having earlier declared an interest in this item, remained in the meeting during its consideration)

The Committee considered a report on the Council's Revenue Budget Strategy 2024/25 to 2026/27, as endorsed by the Executive Board for consultation purposes at its meeting held on the 15th January 2024. The report provided Members with the current view of the Revenue Budget for 2024/2025 together with indicative figures for the 2025/2026 and 2026/2027 financial years based on officers' projections of spending requirements and took account of the provisional settlement issued by Welsh Government on the 20th December 2023.

The Committee was informed that the announced provisional settlement represented an average increase of 3.1% across Wales on the 2023/24 settlement, with Carmarthenshire's increase being 3.3% (£11.0m) thereby taking the Aggregate External Finance to £349,441m for 2024/25. While the settlement was marginally above the Council's planning figure of a 3.0% increase and provided £0.9m more than the Council's original assumption, and was to be welcomed, the inflationary, pay awards and other service pressure increases far exceeded the funding provided. In context, the additional budgets required in 2024/25 to meet the costs of pay awards alone totalled £15m,

Whilst the budget proposals assumed the full delivery of all savings proposals, it was noted further work would be required to develop the cost reductions for the 2025/26 and 2026/27 financial years to be able to maintain the current Budget Strategy and level of Council tax.

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It was noted that given the current risks around the Budget Strategy and the ongoing inflationary backdrop, together with other budgetary pressures, the proposed Council Tax increase for 2024/25 had been set at 6.5% to mitigate reductions to critical services. However, the strategy contained a shortfall of £801k which would need to be addressed in order for the Council to set a balanced budget. In years 2 and 3, the financial picture remained uncertain and, as such, modelled indicative Council Tax rises of 4% and 3% had been made purely for planning purposes and sought to strike a balance with budget reductions. Those proposals would be considered by the Council in setting the Council Tax level for 2024/25 at its meeting on the 28th February, 2024. Additionally, as the Welsh Government final settlement figure was not due to be announced until the 27th February, 2024 any amendments required to be considered to the budget strategy as a result of that announcement would need to be considered by Council on the 28th February.

It was further noted that following the UK Government's decision to provide additional funding to English Local Authorities, it was hoped the Welsh Government would receive an additional £28m through the Barnett Formula and representations were being made for that additional funding to be provided to Welsh Local Authorities.

The Committee thereupon considered the following detailed budget information appended to the Strategy relevant to its remit:

- **Appendix A(i)** – Efficiency summary for the Regeneration, Leisure, Place and Sustainability and Non HRA Housing Services.
- **Appendix A(ii)** – Growth Pressures summary for the for the Place and Sustainability Services, - none for the Regeneration, Leisure, Place and Sustainability and Non HRA Services.
- **Appendix B** – Budget monitoring report for the Regeneration, Leisure, Place and Sustainability and Non HRA Housing Services.
- **Appendix C** – Charging Digest for the Regeneration, Leisure, Place and Sustainability and Non HRA Housing Services.

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- With regard to the budget proposals to increase income within leisure services, the Head of Leisure confirmed they predominantly related to increasing activity and the type of products offered to broaden the income base as opposed to increasing prices. However, while the leisure budget had been set with a 4% price increase, careful consideration had been given to the various rationale behind the increases and the potential impact those could have on the ability of some residents to pay, and that in some cases prices had not been increased. Additionally, the Council operated a concessionary policy to offer reduced rates to those most in need but that needed to be reviewed to achieve consistency of application.
- In response to a question on the proposed reduction in agency use within the Council's Residential Care Homes, the Head of Housing and Public Protection advised that while the Council used agency staff in its residential homes, it was felt the establishment of an in-house agency

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could be operated at lower costs. In that regard, a pilot scheme would be trialled in the four in-house homes in Llanelli from April to July 2024 and, if successful, could be extended throughout the rest of the in-house portfolio across the county and, potentially, extended to include domiciliary care. The scheme would be undertaken on a staggered approach to ensure the proposed savings were achieved. It was also confirmed discussions had been held with the City and County of Swansea which had established a similar in-house agency, and it was felt the proposed in-house provision could be both successful and operated at lower cost than at present.

- With regard to the proposal for the re-alignment of grants and other funding sources to support front line posts and other services, the Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed it was felt the re-alignment complied with grant conditions and would be sustainable for a number of years to protect front line services.
- The Head of Place and Sustainability in response to a question on reductions in the flood defence budget advised the Council could make bids to the Welsh Government for additional funding and that, subject to confirmation, it had secured funding for the current year to offset the reduction to the core budget.
- With regard to the impact of covid on leisure service, the Head of Leisure confirmed that while some services had recovered quicker than others, the overall recovery was positive with the service being back on track, with growth in some areas. However, it had to be appreciated a lot of other factors such as global fuel prices, instability, inflation and the cost of living also impacted on leisure activity.
- It was confirmed that while the budget included a £2m provision as a vacancy factor to help bridge the budget shortfall by for example normal staff turnover and holding vacant posts empty to help achieve target savings, the proposals were considered to be manageable.

RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE CABINET/COUNCIL THAT: -

- 4.1 The 2024/25 – 2026/27 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received.**
- 4.2 The Charging Digests for the Regeneration, Leisure, Place and Sustainability and Non HRA Services, as detailed in Appendix C to the report, be endorsed.**

5. REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The Committee considered the 2023/24 Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports for the Housing, Regeneration and Property, Place and Sustainability and Leisure and Recreation Services for the period up to the 31st October, 2023. It was noted that the revenue budget was forecasting a £142k overspend, the capital budget a £29,731k underspend, whilst the Housing Revenue Account was forecasting a £286k overspend.

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

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- In response to a query on the savings proposals, it was confirmed that where savings were undeliverable, they were revalidated into departmental budgets

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report be received.

6. TENANT INCENTIVE SCHEME

The Committee considered a report, as part of the pre-decision process on policy development on whether the Council should introduce an incentive scheme for its tenants and to what form those incentives should take. The report detailed a range of incentive options for consideration and included:

- Encouraging tenants to downsize to a smaller property.
- Encouraging departing tenants to leave their property in a good condition and with no rent arrears.
- Encouraging the take up of direct debits.
- Recognising when tenants help improve our services.
- Encourage or reward tenants who keep to their Contract Conditions (tenancy).

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- Whilst the principle of operating a tenant incentive scheme could be considered as a bit of a paradox, it was noted that research undertaken by the Housing Quality Network and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (Wales) suggested that the offering of incentives achieved savings for landlords in the long term and could be considered as being a 'spend to save initiative'. For example, council tenants who maintained their properties could save the Council money in repair and void costs.
- Reference was made to the principle of the scheme to incentivise individual tenants to maintain their properties and be good tenants. A suggestion was made that the proposal, if endorsed, could also consider the introduction of a collective community reward for communities who kept their estate areas tidy. It was agreed the principle could be examined as part of the scheme.
- It was noted that should the committee endorse the principle of the scheme, further work would need to be undertaken on its mechanics and eligibility criteria etc for example, incentives would only be paid to tenants not in arrears. Discussions would also be undertaken with other local authorities and registered social landlords on the operation of their incentive schemes. Thereafter, a report would be re-submitted to a future meeting of the committee for its consideration on whether the Council should introduce a pilot scheme to assess its benefit to both the tenant and the Council.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Committee endorse the introduction of a Council tenant incentive scheme.

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

7. **REVISED CARMARTHENSHIRE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2018 - 2033 INTEGRATED SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT AND HABITAT REGULATIONS ASSESSMENT (INCLUDING ADDENDUMS) - FURTHER CONSULTATION**

(NOTE: Councillor K. Broom having earlier declared an interest in this item remained in the meeting during its consideration)

The Committee considered a report seeking authorisation for further consultations to be undertaken for a six week period on the Integrated Sustainability Assessment (including 1st addendum) and the Habitat Regulations Assessment (including 1st and 2nd Addendums) as supporting documents to the Revised Carmarthenshire Local Development Plan 2018-2033. It was noted that the report followed the Council's resolution on the 9th March, 2022 to prepare a second Deposit version of the Revised Local Development Plan (LDP) and the Plans subsequent publication for public consultation between the 17th February to 14th April 2023. It sought to reflect the ongoing challenges procedurally in meeting the requirements in relation to the habitat regulations arising from Natural Resources Wales' guidance on phosphate levels in protected riverine Special Areas of Conservation and water quality and the need to ensure the Plan's preparation and the consideration of its scope and content was procedurally compliant in legislative and regulatory terms.

The following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- In response to a question on the impact the further consultations could have on the Plan's adoption, it was noted that while initially it had hoped the adoption would be completed by the end of 2024, the timescale would now slip to potentially between March and July 2025. Discussions were now being held with the Welsh Government on a revised timeline for its adoption

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the undertaking of further consultations on the Integrated Sustainability Assessment (including 1st addendum and the Habitat Regulations Assessment (including 1st and 2nd Addendums) as supporting documents to the Revised Carmarthenshire Local Development Plan 2018-2033 be approved.

8. **EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT**

The Committee received an explanation for the non-submission of the following scrutiny report:-

- Alternative Town Centre Usage

RESOLVED that the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

9. **FORTHCOMING ITEMS**

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

The Committee received a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 7th March, 2024

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 7th March, 2024 be approved.

10. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 13TH DECEMBER 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 13 December, 2023 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.