

PLACE, SUSTAINABILITY & CLIMATE CHANGE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 JANUARY 2024

PRESENT: Councillor K. Madge (Chair) (In Person)

Councillors (In Person):

K. Davies	S.M. Allen	P. Cooper	T.A.J. Davies
T.M. Higgins	J.D. James	N. Lewis	B.D.J. Phillips
G.B. Thomas			

Councillors (Virtually):

D.C. Evans S. Godfrey-Coles

Also in attendance:

- Councillor A. Davies, Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs, Community Cohesion and Planning Policy **(In Person)**;
- Councillor A. Vaughan Owen, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability **(In Person)**;
- Councillor E. Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Waste and Infrastructure Services **(In Person)**.

Also Present (In Person):

A. Williams, Director of Place and Infrastructure;
R. Griffiths, Head of Place and Sustainability;
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services;
D.W. John, Head of Environmental Infrastructure;
B. Kathrens, Flood Defence and Coastal Protection Manager;
R. James, Group Accountant;
R. Carmichael, Rural Conservation Manager;
D. Hall-Jones, Member Support Officer;
J. Owen, Democratic Services Officer.

Also Present (Virtually):

J. Morgan, Head of Housing and Public Protection

Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen, SA31 1JP and remotely: 10:00am - 12:38pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

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

Councillor	Minute Item(s)	Nature of Interest
S. Godfrey-Coles	6. Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2024/25 to 2026/27	Partner works within the Education section of the Council.

There were no declarations of any prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. EXPLANATION FOR NON SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee received an explanation for the non-submission of the Pest Control report.

In response to a query raised in regard to future funding to manage the issue of sewer rats, the Head of Housing and Public Protection confirmed that this matter would be included as part of the development of the business case following discussions with Welsh Water would take place.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:

4.1 the revised date for the Pest Control report be accepted;

4.2 the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

5. REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The Committee considered the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report which provided an update on the latest budgetary position as at 31st October 2023 in respect of services under the remit of the Place, Sustainability and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee.

The Cabinet Member for Resources, in presenting the report highlighted that the estimated net overspend was £1.957m, which included £700k due to the actual pay award being more than budgeted.

The Highways and Transportation division forecasted an overspend of more than a million pounds for the year. The main variances were £300k due to storm damage to highways, loss of income on Parking Services of £277k and a £908k overspend on School Transport.

The Waste and Environmental Services division forecasted an overspend of £664k which was due to a £775k pressure from the delivery of the interim phase of the waste strategy having increased costs as a result of contingency measures having to be put in place.

It was reported that in delivering the proposed efficiencies for 2023/24 as provided in Appendix G to the report, it was envisaged to achieve efficiencies of £1.3m in 2023/24, which would be £318k below target.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- Reference was made to the Waste Services within the Main Variances - Appendix B of the report. Clarification was sought on the comment 'Outturn includes draw-down from reserves' in regard to the variation of £571k. The Head of Financial Services explained that this was as a result of the transition of the waste collection method towards the kerbside collection. Currently, additional vehicles were providing the kerbside glass collection resulting in temporary additional costs. In order to manage costs, part of the costs were being met by a draw-down on departmental reserves.
- A concern was raised regarding the impact of services should the vacant posts not be filled. It was highlighted that whilst there were proposals to save money by way of not filling vacant posts coupled with the current recruitment freeze the report cites an underspend in connection with various staff vacancies including Noise Control as an example which is a Statutory Duty. The Head of Financial Services explained that full funding for all posts were provided that was part of the Councils staffing structure however, in terms of leavers and maternity cover, the nature of the recruitment process, which varies in duration, creates a salary underspend which is then reflected in the budget monitoring report. The Cabinet Member for Resources emphasised that the introduction of the recruitment freeze reflected the severity of the budget situation and that this was a measure taken to avoid actions such as redundancies.
- Reference was made to Appendix D appended to the report – Department/Schemes main variances. In response to a query raised regarding the comments attributed to variances 'Slipped to future years', the Head of Financial Services provided the Committee with assurances that the funding for capital budgets did not always align with the budget setting which took place on an annual basis and due to this it would often slip to the following year.
- Clarification was sought regarding the comment 'revenue and CCC contribution needed' for the 11k variance attributed to Coastal Protection cited on Appendix D. The Head of Place and Sustainability explained that 11k variance was to fund training within the area of coastal protection, however it was reported that this financial year additional £268k had been successfully secured from the Welsh Government which would offset the funding projection.

- Reference was made to the Countryside Access under Highways and Transport section of Appendix G(ii) Savings on Target. In regard to, the comment 'discretionary clearance by Contractors were being ceased', it was asked if suitable enforcement mechanisms were being put in place to ensure that landowners clear encroaching vegetation? The Head of Environmental Infrastructure stated that enforcement notices would continue to be issued against landowners were necessary and any works that the Council carried out would be recovered from the landowner.
- In respect of the Council's Climate change objectives, it was asked if extra revenue was being received from Welsh Government in order to help achieve the Council's targets? The Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability funding was being received to assist with the introduction of electric vehicles and the upgrading of building insulation/heating. Confirmation was provided that further funding would be sought from a variety of sources which included UK and Welsh Government to achieve the net zero commitment that the Council had made.
- In response to a query regarding the funds attributed to the Towy Cycle Path and the timeliness of the spend, the Director of Place and Infrastructure confirmed that funding profile had been extended and approved to March 2025.
- Reference was made to Appendix G(iv) to the report – Parking Services. The comment stated that 'the services was showing a £375k overspend on the August budget monitoring report due to reduced footfall in town centres'. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated that the retail sector and income from carparks continued to be severely impacted upon following the Covid pandemic where many people had turned to online shopping which had resulted in a dramatic reduction in the footfall within town centres. It was reported that the 5% increase was less than the current inflation period of 6.7% and that it was cheaper to park in the Council owned carparks than privately owned. In addition, it was reported that the Council's carparks cost £600k p/a in tax and non-domestic rates which is paid to the Welsh Government. Assurances were given that other measures were being explored to increase the footfall within town centres within Carmarthenshire.

RESOLVED that the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24 be received.

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

[Note: Councillor S. Godfrey-Coles declared a personal interest in this item. She remained in the meeting, took part in the deliberations and voting thereof.]

The Committee considered a report on the Council's Revenue Budget Strategy 2024/25 to 2026/27, as endorsed by the Cabinet for consultation purposes at its meeting held on the 15th January 2024. The report provided Members with an outlook of the Revenue Budget for 2024/2025 together with indicative figures for 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 Cabinet Member for Resources, in presenting the report informed the Committee 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 significantly above the initial indicative figure of a 3.4% increase and provided some £15.5m more than the Council's original assumption, the Welsh Government had recognised the increased figure would still not be sufficient to meet inflationary pressures facing councils, pay awards and fuel price increases and difficult decisions would need to be made.

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

- **Appendix A(i)** – Efficiency summary for the Place, Sustainability and Climate Change Services;
- **Appendix A(ii)** – Growth Pressures summary for the for the Place and Infrastructure Service;
- **Appendix B** – Budget monitoring report for the Place, Sustainability and Climate Change Services;
- **Appendix C** – Charging Digest for the Place, Sustainability and Climate Change Services.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- It was commented that this report demonstrated an unprecedented situation and highlights the seriousness of the situation where it was getting increasingly difficult to find areas of saving without impacting on services. The Head of Financial Services stated that this was the first time in his career that he had reported an unbalanced draft budget.
- Several strong concerns were raised in regard to the Highway maintenance Services which identified a £100,000 efficiency saving by reducing surface dressing. The Committee had recently written to the Welsh Government to express its concerns in the lack of funding to maintain the roads within Carmarthenshire and the proposal was an additional sacrifice in maintaining the road network.

- In response to a concern raised in relation to the proposal to cease routine mechanical sweeping of rural roads and will only be provided on a reactive basis, the Director of Place and Infrastructure stated that drainage was key in resolving a lot of issues
- A number of concerns relating to the efficiency saving proposals in regard to the following areas were raised:-
 - Surface dressing
 - Change in mechanical sweeping of rural roads from routine to a reactive basis
 - Deterioration of the road conditions

The Director of Place and Infrastructure explained that the purpose of surface dressing was to intervene in a timely manner to extend the lifespan of the road structure. It was acknowledged that unfortunately, the current budget constraints did not conform to long term asset management. Currently, within the restricted budget a programme of surface dressing was in place which was prioritised according to the condition reported and what the budget allowed. In terms of the inspection regime regarding potholes, in principle the line of defence would be to inspect, log and repair potholes accordingly. In addition, it was emphasised that whilst drainage was key in resolving many issues, it was reported that damage occurred would be managed through routine inspection regimes and reporting methods and the method of repair would be based on the severity of the damage and prioritised accordingly.

In response to a concern raised in that should the Committee support the efficiency savings which would be at a detriment to road users potentially exposing Members to be liable, the Cabinet Member for Resources stated that ultimately it would be the responsibility of the UK and Welsh Governments. Due to the seriousness of the situation, Committee Members were informed that the Cabinet Member for Resources would be proposing to raise the current £600k capital assigned to highway maintenance to £2m towards addressing the more serious road conditions.

- Reference was made to the introduction of carparking charges to carparks within the County which currently were free of charge. Concerns were raised that introducing car parking charges on free carparks could have a detrimental impact on local businesses. The Cabinet Member for Waste, Transport and Infrastructure Services stated that a review was currently underway which would consider free car parks and the impact of introducing car parking charges on the locality. A final report would be presented to Scrutiny in due course. It was commented that the carpark charges within Carmarthenshire Council owned carpark was cheaper than neighbouring Authorities.

It was proposed that as part of the consultation, Cabinet consider the proposal on car parking charges be reviewed based upon the rationale for individual locality free car parking provision. This was duly seconded.

- Reference was made to the proposal that learners aged 16 to 18 attending school or college would no longer be provided with free transport, which would mean that they would have to make their own arrangements. Strong concern was expressed that this proposal would have a detrimental impact on the age group being able to attend college potentially affecting their life chances. The Head of Environmental Infrastructure explained that the proposal was set to be introduced in 2025/26, in the meantime a full scoping exercise would take place and that a report could be presented upon completion.

Therefore, it was proposed that Cabinet reconsider the proposed efficiency saving to remove the provision free transport for learners aged 16 to 18 attending school or college. This was duly seconded.

RESOLVED:

6.1 the 2024/25 to 2026/27 Revenue Budget Strategy be received;

6.2 the proposals for delivery of efficiency savings as identified in Appendix A(i) be received subject to the comments raised by the Committee being considered as part of the consultation with a focus on the following:-

- **Increase the funds made available to highway maintenance;**
- **To reconsider and review the introduction of carpark charges based upon the rationale for individual locality free car parking provision;**
- **to reconsider the proposal to cease free school/college transport for 16 to 18 year olds;**

6.3 the Charging Digest for the Place and Infrastructure Services, as detailed in Appendix C to the report, be endorsed.

7. CARMARTHENSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT ACT FORWARD PLAN JAN 2023 - DEC 2025

The Committee received the Council's Environment Act Forward Plan January 2023 – December 2025 for consideration. The report, presented by Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability, provided Members progress made on the delivery of the plan.

The plan included actions which would be delivered and reported on by several service areas, these actions were summarised in appendix A appended to the report.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- Reference was made to the submission ‘to introduce more sustainable practices on this Carmarthenshire County Council farms’, cited in Appendix A to the report. Clarification was sought on this. The Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability explained in response to the Council’s decision in 2019 to declare a climate emergency together with the Council’s decision in 2022 to ask that Cabinet declare a nature emergency, the Cabinet responded and formulated a Cross-Party Climate and Nature Emergency Panel. Alignment with the United Nations biodiversity aspirations known as the Edinburgh Declaration.
- It was raised that Collins Concise Dictionary states the definition of ‘Sustainable’ – able to continue over a period of time. With this in mind, it was commented that by being too constrictive the farms would not be viable for the future and therefore advised that the Cabinet consider the term sustainability, not only for nature but also to enable farms to produce food products in a sustainable manner. In response, the Cabinet member for Decarbonisation, Sustainability and Climate Change clarified the meaning of “sustainability” in this context as relating to the Sustainability Principle, enshrined within the Well-being of Future Generations Act and the process of improving the economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales.
- Reference was made to the progress on Property which stated ‘working in partnership with West Wales Rivers Trust’. In response to queries raised regarding the use of consultants, the Rural Conservation Manager provided a background to how the council had worked with the West Wales Rivers Trust and many other environmental organisations. Currently the Council was in receipt of a small amount of funding which could be used for work that partners were delivering in Carmarthenshire. The West Wales Rivers Trust was successful in the bid and works with a number of farms to assist in the pollution run off from farmyards. Case studies were developed by working with the Rivers Trust and utilising their expertise.

RESOLVED that Carmarthenshire County Council Environment Act Forward Plan Jan 2023 – Dec 2025 be received.

8. FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Local Strategy report. The report, presented by Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Decarbonisation and Sustainability, provided detailed information in regard to the Council’s approach to managing flood risk in Carmarthenshire.

The report explained how flooding would be managed across Carmarthenshire, consistent with local objectives, measures policies and our cooperate and national strategies. The strategy also provided some background information on Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management at both a local and national level.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- In commending the detail provided within the report, it was commented that unfortunately, flooding issues would remain an issue should the historic intervention methods remain in place. New innovative methods need to be explored and introduced to reduce the flooding issues that were faced with the changing climate and as more developments arise. It was felt that it additional pressure on the Welsh Government to consider change of land use where rainfall was at its heaviest. It was therefore proposed that a letter be sent on behalf of the Committee explaining that the concerns about flooding and that land use needs to be changed to manage the current flooding issues.
- It was commented that the Cabinet should consider making further funds available for this area.
- The Flood Defence and Coastal Protection Manager, in response to a query clarified that the as part of a team the Flood Incident Duty Officer (FIDO) on a weekly rota basis carries out daily monitoring of the weather, particularly rainfall and the tides. Concerns are reported to management who act accordingly.
- In response to a query regarding culvert cleaners, the Head of Environmental Infrastructure explained that currently culvert cleaners and jet systems were shared between depots within Carmarthenshire and are deployed on a prioritisation basis subject to resources.
- It was asked how proactive was the team in offering floodgates to those who may need them in areas of prone to flooding? The Flood Defence and Coastal Protection Manager explained that 'flood fairs' were being held in areas of need. It was suggested that letters and leaflets be produced and delivered to households explaining what they could do to protect their properties from flooding.
- It was raised that currently any debris cleaned from drains was cleared and left on the pavement/roadside instead of being taken away. This was then subject to being washed back into the drainage system during the next heavy rainfall. It was observed that this practice was a waste of time and resources. It was therefore suggested that following a drain clearance debris be removed. Officers took accepted the point raised and would consider.

RESOLVED that:

- 8.1 Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Local Strategy be received.**
- 8.2 a letter be sent to Welsh Government outlining the Committee's concerns regarding future funding for flooding to allow innovative approaches for areas with a high risk of flooding.**

9. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee considered the list of forthcoming items to be placed on the agenda for the next meeting scheduled to take place on 11th March, 2024 and was afforded the opportunity to request for any specific information that Members may wish to include within the reports.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items for the Committee meeting to be held on the 11th March 2024 be agreed.

10. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 14TH DECEMBER 2023

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 14th December, 2024 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE