

# COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16 January 2020

**PRESENT:** Councillor F. Akhtar (Chair)

**Councillors:**

C.A. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, H.L. Davies, R.E. Evans, S.J.G. Gilasbey, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, H.B. Shepardson, A.D.T. Speake and G.B. Thomas

**Also in attendance:**

Councillor L.D. Evans, Executive Board Member for Housing  
P. Hughes-Griffiths, Executive Board Member for Culture, Sport and Tourism  
D.M. Jenkins, Executive Board Member for Resources

**The following Officers were in attendance:**

I. Jones, Head of Leisure  
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services  
L. Quelch, Head of Planning  
J. Jones, Head of Regeneration  
J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities  
J. Fearn, Head of Property  
H. Morgan, Economic Development Manager  
A. Thomas, Group Accountant  
L. James, Partnership and Engagement Manager  
R.M. Davies, Providing More Homes Lead  
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

**Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP. - 10.00 am - 12.50 pm**

## 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D.C. Evans and B. Jones.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Alan Speake to his first meeting following his recent appointment by Council as a member of the Committee replacing Councillor Aled Vaughan Owen.

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

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

The following declaration of personal interest was made:-

Councillor	Minute Number	Nature of Interest
A Davies	6 – Chief Executive's Departmental Draft Business Plan 2020/23 (rural portfolio)	Tenant of a county farm

## 3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

No public questions had been received.

#### 4. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2020/21 to 2022/23

The Committee considered the Revenue Budget Strategy 2020/21 to 2022/23 endorsed by the Executive Board for consultation purposes at its meeting held on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2020. The report provided Members with the current view of the Revenue Budget for 2020/2021 together with indicative figures for the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 financial years based on officers' projections of spending need taking into account the provisional settlement issued by Welsh Government (WG) on 16th December 2019.

The Head of Financial Services advised that whilst the announced provisional settlement represented an average increase of 4.3% across Wales on the 2019/20 settlement, Carmarthenshire's increase been 4.4% (£11.548m) taking the Aggregate External Finance to £274.159m for 2020/21. However, new responsibilities and transfers into the settlement, including Teachers Pensions and Pay which were only partially funded within the settlement, accounted for some £5.8m or half the overall funding increase.

The report included details of the Welsh Government's Service Specific Grants being provided alongside the provisional settlement at an all Wales level, with many remaining at a broadly similar level to 2018/19.

The Head of Financial Services referred to the increased spending pressures on the budget, as identified in 3.4 of the report, and advised that whilst those pressures totalled £13m, the total value for growth, based on current information was only £7.4m. A number of those pressures fell within the remit of the Community Scrutiny Committee and included decarbonisation proposals, Local Development Plan and the Ash Tree die back programme. A sum of £325k had also been built back into the programme to address the historic shortfall against budgeted forecast and actual income within the planning division.

In summary, the budget proposals assumed the full delivery of all savings proposals, together with the identification and delivery of the shortfall in savings proposals for the 2021/22, and 2022/23 financial years. Further cost reductions would need to be identified and/or larger council tax increases agreed to deliver a balanced budget for the latter two years. Furthermore, given the scale of the pressures and forecasted budget gap, proposed Council Tax increases had been maintained at the previous Medium Term Financial Plan levels of 4.89% in each of the three financial years, which offered some mitigation to the savings proposals.

In conclusion, the Committee was advised that due to the delay in receiving the provisional settlement and the Welsh Government's final settlement not due to be published until the 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 the County Council would set its final budget on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2020.

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, Planning and Non HRA Housing Services;
- **Appendix A(ii)** – Growth Pressures summary for the Regeneration and

- Planning Services (none for the Leisure and Non HRA Services;
- **Appendix B** – Budget monitoring report for the Regeneration, Leisure, Planning and Non HRA Housing Services;
- **Appendix C** – Charging Digest for the Regeneration, Leisure, Planning and Non HRA Housing Services;

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

- Reference was made to the provisional 4.4% settlement and its positive impact on the Council's cost reduction programme resulting in the level of reductions to be made over the next three years falling by £8.697m from £25,115m to £16,418m. Clarification was sought on the potential impact future reducing WG settlements could have on the programme.

The Head of Financial Services confirmed the Welsh Government had not provided any indication of future settlement figures beyond the 2020/21 financial year making it difficult to construct multi-year budgets. Over recent years local government had witnessed a relaxation of public sector pay restraint, whilst receiving better than anticipated settlements. The authority was forecasting increased budgetary pressures over future years and if those persisted, for example, increased pay settlements and increases in the living wage, it would need to revisit and adjust its cost reduction programme in response.

- The Head of Financial Services in response to questions on the £10m increase in the budget strategy for education, confirmed that comprised part transfers in from the Welsh Government for pay and pensions and part from the improved settlement. He also confirmed that in relation to the existing £3m deficit in the Schools Delegated Budget, officers were working with the affected schools on addressing their deficits.
- In response to a question on inherent risks built into the budget strategy e.g. inflation, the Head of Financial Services confirmed the strategy reflected an inflationary rate of 2%, in line with the Bank of England Projections. However, as the largest proportion of the Council's expenditure related to staff costs as well as commission care costs, which were linked to the living wage, pay growth posed more of a risk than inflation. For example the budget strategy published on the 30th December assumed an increase in the living wage to £8.63. However, on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, the U.K. Government announced it would increase to £8.72, an increase of .9p per hour or over £400k more than the budget estimate
- Reference was made to appendix A(i) and the managerial efficiencies identified in relation to the Pendine Outdoor Education Centre, St Clears Leisure Centre and Y Gât, St Clears. Clarification was sought on the current position in relation to their potential future development arising from the Committee's recent site visits.

The Head of Leisure advised that discussions were continuing in relation to those facilities and reports thereon would be presented through the Council's political process in due course.

- The Committee made reference to the council's library and museums service and to its previous site visits thereto. Views were expressed, that due to the level of re-development undertaken / proposed for the service, it would be advantageous for those visits to be repeated.

- The Head of Leisure in response to a comment on the absence of a Tourist Information Centre in Llanelli advised that staff within Yr Hwb had been upskilled and could provide tourist advice. However, he could examine the need for signposting that provision with colleagues from the Tourism Team within Regeneration.

The Economic Development Manager advised that the Council had recently entered into a new tourist Project with Ireland called 'Celtic Route', funded via an ERDF Grant, aimed at encouraging people to visit parts of the County not normally visited and a web site advertising that project had recently been launched.

- Reference was made to the reduction in the Welsh Government's free swim grant and the potential impact that could have on children's health and ability to swim. A suggestion was made that the Council fund the grant reduction.

The Head of Leisure confirmed that in recent years the authority had received a reduction in the grant from the Welsh Government to participate in the free swim programme for the under 16's and over 65's. The recent reductions to that grant had resulted in the authority having to correspondingly reduce the number of public swimming times available for free swimming.

He also referred to the Committee's previous debates on the cost to primary schools in having to take children swimming as part of the current Key Stage 2 curriculum. Whereas previously, that swimming had been free, a circa £2.10 charge per pupil had now been levied with the schools also having to pay transport costs. Although the new curriculum, to be introduced in 2021, did not explicitly require schools to provide swimming lessons, any reduction in that provision would not only impact on attendance levels at the Council's swimming pools, and its pay swimming lessons.

The Committee having regard to the above referred to the £293k unallocated contingency sum within the budget strategy and expressed the view the Executive Board should consider utilising a portion of that sum to fund the estimated £150k cost to primary schools of providing swimming as part of the current KS2 curriculum.

#### **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:-**

- 4.1 The 2020/21 – 2022/23 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received.**
- 4.2 The Charging Digest for the Regeneration, Leisure, Planning and Non HRA Services, as detailed in Appendix C to the report be endorsed.**
- 4.3 The Executive Board, as part of the budgetary consultation, be recommended to fund the estimated £150k cost to primary schools of providing swimming lessons as part of the Key Stage 2 Curriculum, with the cost thereof being met from the £293k unallocated contingency within the budget strategy.**
- 4.4 The Committee undertake site visits to the Council's libraries and museums.**

## 5. COMMUNITIES DEPARTMENTAL DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2020 - 2023

The Committee considered the Communities Departmental Draft Business Plan 2020 – 2023 in relation to those services falling within its remit i.e. Housing Services and Leisure Services. It was noted that further work would be undertaken on the draft following comments and engagement with scrutiny, elected members and staff groups.

The following issues/questions were raised on the report:

- The Head of Leisure in response to a question on invest to save at the Council's 5 leisure centres to reduce energy consumption, confirmed that energy costs for heating swimming pools was the biggest cost faced by the centres. To address those, each centre had been independently assessed by the carbon trust and discussions were on-going to see what additional improvement works could be undertaken to enhance previously introduced energy reduction measures. Those previous measures had included the installation of swimming pool covers at the 5 pools and also solar panels at Carmarthen Leisure Centre under the 'invest to save' scheme. However, with energy cost increases of £70k, further reduction measures were required to offset that increase.

The Head of Property reported that the Council was currently discussing technology investments with its energy consultants 'Ameresco' to achieve energy reductions at its properties, including swimming pools which could include solar panels and lighting improvements. It was anticipated those works would commence later in 2020.

- In response to a question on risk reference SS600018 relating to participant safety, especially around water areas, the Head of Leisure confirmed it covered the risks the Department had to take into consideration on the potential for people to drown and to maintain and review measures to minimise that risk. For example, whilst all of the council's leisure centres had trained lifeguards on duty at all time, that provision was more difficult with marine and other water areas. For beaches managed by the authority at Pembrey/Cefn Sidan, the RNLI provided lifeguard cover during the summer months. The risk arising from water borne activities was recognised by the Department and was continually monitored.
- Reference was made to the cultural services element of the business plan relating to the Development of Y Stordy and the delivery of the museums transformation plan. An assurance was sought that no two museums would be closed simultaneously without alternatives being in place.

The Head of Leisure advised that in relation to Y Stordy, the building works had been completed and were currently in the 12 week drying out period to ensure conditions were appropriate to receive the stored archives. It was anticipated the building would open towards the end of spring 2020.

With regard to the museum transformation plan, every effort would be undertaken to ensure no facilities were closed simultaneously and it was important when facilities were closed the authority communicated that with the public directing them to suitable alternatives. However, it was equally important to avoid any delays to the works as that could result in increased costs and discussions would need to be undertaken with the council's



contractors on the timing of the works.

- Reference was made to the works undertaken and proposed for Pembrey Country Park making it one of the top three visitor attractions in Wales. The local ward members requested their appreciation to the Council for its investment in the park be recorded in the minutes.
- In response to a question on the works to be undertaken to the Burry Port Harbour Walls, it was reported that tender documents were due for return shortly with works expected to commence late spring 2020 with a 6 month completion timescale.
- With regard to a question on risk factor SS600019 on leisure (ongoing political and public support for service) the Head of Leisure advised that the service was largely non-statutory and accordingly was dependent upon political and public support. Should that support not continue, their future provision could be at risk. However, support was very strong at present
- Reference was made to the service priority for working with Town and Community Councils for leisure provision and to whether the Council made any financial contribution to those authorities.

The Head of Leisure advised that, wherever possible, the Council did draw down S106 money from planning developments for investment in local leisure facilities. Work was undertaken with those authorities to identify means of maximising their investments which linked in with the Asset Transfer Programme. There were also numerous examples of the council working in partnership with town and community councils and private sports clubs to develop leisure facilities.

- In response to a question on bringing private homes back into use, the Head of Homes and Safer Communities reported that the Valley Task Force had recently been extended to include parts of Carmarthenshire thereby enabling the Council to access additional resources to improve homes.
- With regard to the time taken to return void properties to the housing stock for re-letting, it was reported that averaged four weeks. In relation to the Council's long term voids, whilst a fully funded programme had been introduced to return them to use, delays were being encountered in its implementation due to difficulties with contractor availability. However, of the 90 properties involved, 50 had been issued to contractors and were in the process of being refurbished and typically took up to 120 days to complete.
- With regard to a statement on the availability of temporary accommodation within the County, the Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised that a commissioning plan is being developed to provide smaller better dispersed accommodation and that would be submitted to a future meeting.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Communities Departmental Draft Business Plan 2020 - 2023 be received.**

## **6. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLAN 2020/2023**

(NOTE: Councillor A. Davies had earlier declared an interest in the element of the report relating to the Council's Rural Portfolio)

The Committee considered the report on the Chief Executive's Departmental Business Plan 2020/23 in relation to its Regeneration Division that fell within its remit.

The following issues/questions were raised on the report:

- Reference was made to the availability of EU funding and clarification sought on whether the Council would be applying for grants to facilitate new development within its industrial sites to create job opportunities.

The Head of Regeneration confirmed that with a large industrial portfolio the Council was always exploring avenues to draw down grant monies wherever possible in addition to utilising the Council's Invest to Save Scheme and the Property Development Grant. Investigations were also on-going into the feasibility of targeting the 10 Towns Initiative to provide job opportunities.

The Economic Development Manager advised that whilst EU funding would come to an end in 2025 both the U.K and Welsh Government were working on two replacements for the EU Structural funds namely, the U.K. 'Shared Prosperity Fund' and the Welsh Governments 'Investment Fund for Wales'.

She advised discussions were being held with the Welsh Government for funding from the Investment Fund for Wales to reflect local and regional need and to be devolved to the regions. Work was also being undertaken, in conjunction with Aberystwyth University, on providing documentary evidence on the need for a Rural Fund for Wales.

- In response to a question on priority 10 and the Council Farm Estate, it was confirmed by Councillor D. Jenkins that the Executive Board did not have any current plans to dispose of any part of the farm estate. The priority solely related to examining how the council could maximise benefits from the estate e.g. the provision of starter units and maximising development/diversification opportunities, particularly in relation to the generation of renewable energy.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Chief Executive's Departmental Business Plan 2020/2023 be received.**

## **7. ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLAN 2020/2023**

The Committee considered the report on the Environment Departmental Business Plan 2020/2023 in relation to those services falling within its remit i.e. Planning and Property Services and outlining the priorities for the department over the Plan's time frame.

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

- Reference was made to the £100k growth bid for addressing ash die back disease within the County and clarification sought on where that would be utilised and if it was sufficient to address both the disease throughout the county and to plant replacement trees.

The Head of Planning advised that in relation to tree planting that cost would be met at the present time from within existing budgets for which match funding was available. The current priority for the Council was to identify locations where ash trees could be found on its property and the

majority of the funding would be utilised to fund that programme and the appointment of a co-ordinating officer. Whilst the actual cost of replanting was unknown at the present time that, together with any subsequent maintenance regime, would need to be taken into account as part of future budget proposals.

She further advised that a large number of affected trees were situated on third party private land and one of the co-ordinating officers' role would be liaising with private land owners on their obligations with regard to treatment/removal/replanting.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Environment Departmental Business Plan 2020/2023 be received.**

## **8. COUNCIL TENANT SURVEY (STAR) RESULTS (2019)**

The Committee received the results of the recent Council Tenant Survey (STAR) Results 2019 commissioned by the Council and undertaken on its behalf by ARP Research. Some 5,000 tenants were surveyed, with over 2,000 responses being received to the 8 standard question areas used across the housing tenant to achieve a benchmark against other housing providers. The key headline responses to the survey were satisfaction rates of:-

- 82% with the Council's services,
- 79% with the quality of homes;
- 77% value for money of rent
- 76% value for money of service charge;
- 64% listening and acts on views
- 75% repairs and maintenance overall;
- 79% last completed repair
- 85% neighbourhood as a place to live
- 66% grounds maintenance service
- 58% deals with anti-social behaviour.

The report also set out the next steps to be taken in response to the survey's findings

The following issues/questions were raised on the report:

- In response to a question on the 58% score for dealing with anti-social behaviour the Engagement and Partnership Manager advised that was a difficult score to measure and discussions would now be held with tenants, and the police, to examine issues identified by the survey.

The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed the Division was investing additional resources into its anti-social team which would now be addressing the issues identified by the survey. However, it had to be acknowledged that whilst achieving a high satisfaction rate in this indicator was not easy, the division would continue to attempt to improve the rate.

- With regard to a question on the Council's performance in comparison with other housing providers, it was reported that the Welsh Government was currently collating data on their performance which was expected to be published in April. The Council was also examining the feasibility of



becoming a member of a benchmarking club where it could assess both its position with other providers on housing provision and the cost of that provision. An influencing factor on cost comparisons with housing associations was the age of the stock, as association stock was, on average, significantly younger than that of local authorities.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the STAR results 2019 be received.**

## **9. WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS 2017-2020**

The Committee received a report on Carmarthenshire Library Services' Annual Assessment 2018/19 produced in accordance with the requirements of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 that placed a Statutory Duty on all Public Library Authorities 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service' and on Welsh Ministers 'to superintend and promote the improvement' of public library services in Wales. In accordance with that requirement, the Welsh Government had completed its assessment of Carmarthenshire's Library Services Annual Return for 2018/19 against the 6<sup>th</sup> Quality Assessment Framework, with Carmarthenshire meeting all 12 core entitlements in full. Of the ten quality indicators which had targets, Carmarthenshire had achieved nine in full, with one having been partially met, being only one of four authorities to achieve that level.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.**

## **10. REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2019/20**

The Committee considered the 2019/20 Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports for the Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Leisure and Recreation Services for the period up to the 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2019. It was noted that the revenue budget was forecasting a £342k overspend, the capital budget a £1,728k underspend, whilst the Housing Revenue Account was forecasting a £333k underspend.

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

- In relation to a question on the forecasted £55k higher sales volumes in income to the budget forecast at the Amman Valley Leisure Centre, it was confirmed that was attributed to a significant amount of work undertaken on improving the centre's wet and dry areas resulting in an increase in membership levels.
- With regard to a question on the delay in the development of one supported housing scheme in Llanelli, the Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed the delay had not resulted in any increased costs.

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

## **11. SCRUTINY ACTION UPDATE**

The Committee received a report detailing the progress achieved in relation to the requests or referrals emerging from previous meetings.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.**

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

The Committee considered the explanation provided for the non-submission of two scrutiny reports.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the non-submission report be received.**

**13. FORTHCOMING ITEMS**

The Committee considered a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items for the Committee scheduled to be held in February 2020 be approved.**

**14. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 19TH NOVEMBER, 2019**

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 be signed as a correct record.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**CHAIR**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**DATE**