

COMMUNITY AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 2 February 2021

PRESENT: Councillor F. Akhtar (Chair)

Councillors:

J.M. Charles (In place of H.L. Davies), C.A. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, D.C. Evans, R.E. Evans, S.J.G. Gilasbey, B.W. Jones, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, H.B. Shepardson, D. Thomas and G.B. Thomas

Also in attendance:

Councillor C.A. Campbell, Executive Board Member for Communities and Rural Affairs
E. Dole, Leader of the Council
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
L.M. Stephens, Deputy Leader of the Council and Leader of the Independent Group

The following Officers were in attendance:

C. Moore, Director of Corporate Services
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services
J. Jones, Head of Regeneration
I. Jones, Head of Leisure
J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities
L. Quelch, Head of Planning
A. Thomas, Group Accountant
J. Corner, Technical Officer
R.M. Davies, Strategic Housing Delivery Manager
L. James, Partnership and Engagement Manager
G. Williams, Team Leader
S. Williams, Senior Accountant
M.S. Davies, Democratic Services Officer
E. Bryer, Democratic Services Officer
R. Lloyd, Democratic Services Officer
K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer
S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator

Virtual Meeting - 10.00 am - 12.00 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Handel Davies and Councillor H.A.L. Evans (Executive Board Member for Environment).

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

There were no declarations of any prohibited party whips.

The following declarations of interest were made

Councillor	Minute Number	Nature of Interest
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J. Gilasbey	4 – Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2021/22 to 2023/24	Trustee of Kidwelly Tinplate Museum
J Gilasbey	5 – Housing Revenue Account Budget and Housing Rent Setting for 2021/22	Family Member is a Council Tenant
J. Gilasbey	7 – Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2020/21	Trustee of Kidwelly Tinplate Museum
J. Gilasbey	11 – Forthcoming Items	Executive Board Forward Work Programme – Family member is employed in education

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2021/22 to 2023/24

(Note: Cllr J Gilasbey had earlier declared an interest in this item and had been granted dispensation by the Standards Committee to speak only in respect of that interest)

The Committee considered the report presented by the Executive Board Member for Resources on the Council's Revenue Budget Strategy 2021/22 to 2023/24, as endorsed by the Executive Board for consultation purposes at its meeting held on the 18th January 2020. The report provided Members with the current view of the Revenue Budget for 2021/2022 together with indicative figures for the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 financial years based on officers' projections of spending requirements and takes account of the provisional settlement issued by Welsh Government on the 22nd December 2020. It also reflected current departmental submissions for savings proposals after taking account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the delivery of those savings.

The Executive Board Member advised that whilst the announced provisional settlement represented an average increase of 4.0% across Wales on the 2020/21 settlement, Carmarthenshire's increase had been 3.8% (£10.466m) thereby taking the Aggregate External Finance to £284.820m for 2021/22 which included £244k for teachers pay.

Whilst 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 2022/23, and 2023/24 financial years, further cost reductions would need to be identified for those latter years to be able to maintain the current Budget Strategy and level of Council tax.

Although the Strategy proposed a 4.89% Council Tax increase for each of the three financial years, the Executive Board had recommended the increase for 2021/22 be reduced to 4.48%, which would be considered by the Council in setting the Council Tax level for 2021/22 at its meeting on the 3rd March 2021. Additionally, the Welsh Government final settlement figure was to be announced on the 2nd March 2021 and any amendments required to be considered to the budget strategy from that announcement would also be considered by Council on

the 3rd March

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:-

- The Executive Board Member in response to a question on the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the collection of Council tax, advised that the Council had taken measures in that regard by extending the payment period over 12 months to the end of the 2020/21 financial year, instead of the usual 10 month payment period. The Welsh Government had also announced a 75% grant would be made available to local government in Wales to assist with any shortfall in council tax collection rates arising from the pandemic
- In response to a question on the sufficiency of the £300k pa budget provision for addressing the implications of Ash Die Back disease on council owned land, the Head of Planning confirmed the level to be sufficient to meet the council's requirements but that would be reviewed as time progressed. With regard to infected trees on private owned land, the Council was working with landowners to inform them of their responsibilities and to provide guidance where needed. The Council also had a contingency fund to undertake works in default where necessary, on a rechargeable basis.
- With regard to a question on the impact of the covid pandemic on the economy of Carmarthenshire and the level of job losses, the Head of Regeneration advised that whilst some job losses had occurred, the Government's furlough scheme had helped support employment and abate that level to date. However, it was anticipated further job losses would occur over the next few months. The Council anticipated up to 3,000 jobs could be lost within Carmarthenshire and it had adopted an action plan to help regenerate the economy by various means that included its capital programme and procurement policy which could help create approximately 2,000 jobs. It was anticipated an additional 1,000 jobs could also be created in conjunction with the Council's partners in the public and private sectors.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD/COUNCIL THAT:-

- 4.1 The 2021/22 – 2023/24 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received.**
- 4.2 The Charging Digests for the Regeneration, Leisure, Planning and Non HRA Services, as detailed in Appendix C to the report, be endorsed.**

5. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET AND HOUSING RENT SETTING FOR 2021/22

(NOTE: Councillor J Gilasbey having earlier declared an interest in this item left the meeting during its consideration)

The Committee considered the report presented by the Executive Board Member for Resources on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Housing Rent Setting for 2021/22, being presented as part of the budget consultation process that brought together the latest proposals for the Revenue and Capital budgets for the Housing Revenue Account 2021/24 to be presented to the Executive Board and Council for determination.

The Executive Board Member advised that the report had been prepared reflecting the latest proposals contained within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, being the primary financial planning tool for delivering and maintaining the Carmarthenshire Homes Standard *Plus* (CHS+) for the future. The proposed investment within the current business plan delivered the CHS by 2015 (to those homes where the tenants agreed to have work undertaken) provided investment to maintain CHS+ and continued investment for the Authority's Affordable Homes Commitment.

The Executive Board Member reminded the Committee that with regard to the setting of the Housing Rents, the Authority had, on the 24th February 2015, adopted the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rent Policy for the four year period ending in 2018/19. For 2019/20, the Welsh Government had provided an interim policy while it awaited the results of the Affordable Housing Supply Review. Following that review, the Welsh Government had decided to retain the policy for a further 5 year period from 2020/21 – 2024/25 with some additional/amended requirements, as detailed within the report. The annual rent uplift (total rent envelope) would be up to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) + 1% for each of the 5 years, using the level of CPI from September of the previous year. CPI + 1% would be the maximum increase allowable in any one year but must not be regarded as an automatic uplift to be applied by social landlords and their decisions on rent should have regard to the affordability for tenants.

In applying that policy for 2021/22, the Welsh Government had notified the level of rents for individual tenants could be reduced or frozen or rise by up to an additional £2 over and above the CPI+1% on condition the total rental income collected increased by no more than CPI +1%

If the budget proposals were to be endorsed, the 2021/22 Housing Revenue Account would have an expenditure level of £51m, with the capital programme being £37.6m for 2021/22, £37.4m for 2022/23 and £30.6m for 2023/24

The following issues were raised in relation to the report:-

- In response to a question on the percentage of Council Tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit, the Committee was advised one third were paying full rent, one third partial rent and the remaining third were received full benefit. The Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised that setting rent levels represented a difficult balancing act between ensuring rises did not

adversely impact on tenants' ability to pay, whilst providing funding for the capital programme to improve the condition of the housing stock and the building of additional affordable homes

- Reference was made to the numbers of council tenants who had transferred from housing benefit to Universal Credit and to what impact that may have had on rent arrears and how that transfer was being managed.

The Executive Board Member for Housing confirmed that currently 1904 tenants had transferred to Universal Credit to date, increasing by 100 per month on average, with it being anticipated approximately 3,500 would transfer over time. Whilst current rent arrears were £1.5m, representing a £50k increase on the same time last year, it was less than anticipated and better than within other local authorities. The Council also worked with tenants on managing their transfer which included encouraging rent payment by direct debit.

- In response to a question on the decarbonisation proposals for Council homes, the Executive Board Member for Housing advised that the type and nature of work to be undertaken would vary from property to property depending on age and design and it was anticipated those works could save tenants between 60%-70% on their energy bills. While the cost of the proposals would be funded by the Council, via borrowing on capital, it was hoped the Welsh Government would provide grant aid towards those costs.
- The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed that the rent increases proposed within the report only applied to council owned homes. For those homes managed by the Council, on behalf of other landlords, rental levels would be higher.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD/COUNCIL:-

- 4.1 to increase the average housing rent as per the Welsh Government's Social Housing Rents Policy i.e.:-**
- **Properties at target rents to increase by 1.27%**
 - **Properties where rent was below target rent to increase by 1.27% plus a maximum progression of £1 per week**
 - **Properties above target rent be frozen until such time as they met the target**

thereby producing an average housing rent increase of 1.5% (CPI + 1%) or £1.35, producing a sustainable Business Plan, maintain CHS+ and resourcing the Affordable Homes Programme, as supported by the Carmarthenshire Home Standards Steering Group;

- 4.2 To maintain garage rents at £9.00 per week and garage bases at £2.25 per week;**
- 4.3 To apply the service charge policy to ensure tenants who received the benefit from specific services paid for those services;**

- 4.4 To increase charges for using the Council's sewerage treatment works in line with the rent increase;
- 4.5 To approve the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2021/24 (2022/23 & 2023/24 being soft budgets) as set out in Appendix A to the report;
- 4.6 To approve the proposed Capital Programme and applicable funding for 2021/22 and the indicative spends for 2022/23 to 2023/24, as set out in Appendix B to the report.

6. THE CARMARTHENSHIRE HOMES STANDARD PLUS (CHS+)- BUSINESS PLAN 2021-24

The Committee received a report presented by the Executive Board Member for Housing on the Carmarthenshire Homes Standards Plus (CHS+) Business Plan 2021-24, the purpose of which was fourfold. Firstly, it explained the vision and detail of the CHS+ over the next three years and what it meant for tenants. Secondly, it confirmed the financial profile, based on current assumptions for delivery of the CHS+ over the next three years. Thirdly, it showed how the housing investment programme could help stimulate the local economy and recovery from Covid 19. Fourthly, it produced a business plan for the annual application to the Welsh Government for Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) for 2020/21 equating to £6.1m.

The report highlighted the importance of the Council supporting its tenants and residents in everything it did, with the following four key themes having been identified as driving the business for the next three years:-

- Theme 1 – Supporting Tenants and Residents;
- Theme 2 – Investing in our Homes' and the Environment
- Theme 3 - Providing more homes;
- Theme 4 – Foundational Economy, Community Benefits and Procurement

The Following questions/issues were raised on the report:

- The Executive Board Member in response to a question on void levels within the authority's 9,200 homes, advised there were approximately 340 voids at present. Those properties required differing levels of work and efforts were being undertaken to reduce the total voids as quickly as possible. However, the covid pandemic had impacted on the speed and timescale for those works, especially during the initial 3 month period of the pandemic when contractors were unable to work on site.
- With regard to a question on the impact of the pandemic on the council's house building programme, the Executive Board Member confirmed that, as with the voids, delays had been encountered initially from contractors not being able to attend on site and subsequently from delays in the supply of building materials following the easing of the lockdown. Works were now progressing, however, and it was hoped the programme would return to schedule in the near future.
- The Executive Board Member confirmed the Council's House Building programme aimed to address the shortage of housing in both rural and urban areas and work was currently ongoing on the development of a further 21 sites throughout the county.
- In response to a question on homelessness levels with the County, the

Executive Board Member advised that in March 2020 the Welsh Government had placed a duty on all Welsh Local Housing Authorities to house the homeless, including the single homeless. While homeless levels were increasing, 117 people had currently presented themselves to the Council as homeless, 100 of whom were single persons, and the Council was working with them to address their housing requirements, which included providing advice and guidance on managing a successful tenancy

She further commented on the increase in single homelessness within the County which had highlighted a shortfall in accommodation provision for single persons within the Council's housing stock, and advised that would be taken into consideration as part of the Council's future house building proposals.

- In response to a question on the creation of a 10 year Affordable Housing and Regeneration Masterplan, the Committee was advised that whilst their launch had initially been planned for March 2020, that had been delayed due to the Covid pandemic. Work was now progressing on their re-launch in the near future

RESOLVED THAT IT BE RECOMMENDED TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD/COUNCIL TO:-

- 6.1 Confirm the vision of the CHS+, the Council's new build programme, the financial and delivery programmes over the next three years;**
- 6.2 Confirm the submission of the 2021/22 Business Plan to the Welsh Government;**
- 6.3 Note the principles behind moving towards carbon neutral homes and developing a decarbonisation strategy to support that;**
- 6.4 Note the importance of the investment included in the Plan and its role in stimulating the local economy and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.**

7. REVENUE & CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2020/21

(Note: Cllr J Gilasbey had earlier declared an interest in this item and had been granted dispensation by the Standards Committee to speak only in respect of that interest)

The Committee considered a report presented by the Executive Board Member for Resources on the 2020/21 Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports for the Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Leisure and Recreation Services for the period up to the 31st October, 2020. It was noted that the revenue budget was forecasting a £293k overspend, the capital budget a £44,381k underspend, whilst the Housing Revenue Account was forecasting a £2,784k underspend.

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

- In response to a question on the current position on Carmarthen Mart, the Executive Board Member for Resources advised that tender documents would be issued shortly with it being anticipated a new tenant could be in place within several months.

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

8. 2020/21 HALF YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT (1ST APRIL TO 30TH SEPTEMBER 2020) RELEVANT TO THIS SCRUTINY

The Committee received the 2020/21 Half Year Performance Report for the period 1st April to 30th September 2020 presented by the Executive Board Members – Leader, Deputy Leader, Housing and Culture, Sport and Tourism in respect of the areas falling within their portfolios and the Committees remit.

The report detailed the progress made against the actions and measures in the Corporate Strategy 2020/12 on the delivery of the Well-Being Objectives within the Committee's remit. It was noted that due to the covid pandemic, Departmental Action plans for 2020/21 were not being monitored to allow services to concentrate on dealing with emergencies but that a half year Covid 19 pandemic Community Impact Assessment had been produced in lieu. An annual report for 2020/21 would also be produced on the Corporate Well-being Objectives

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. COMMUNITY COHESION ACTION PLAN

The Committee considered a report presented by the Executive Board Member for Communities and Rural Affairs providing an overview of the Community Cohesion Regional Plan and seeking its endorsement of the Action Plan attached thereto.

The Executive Board Member advised that Carmarthenshire was the host authority for receiving Welsh Government grant for the Mid and West Wales region comprising the local authorities of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Powys. The Action Plan had four main themes together with several key objectives i.e.:-

- Theme A – Identifying and mitigating community tensions (hate crime, extremism, anxiety and anti-social behaviour) relating to Brexit;
- Theme B – Foster Good Relations;
- Theme C – Ensure Equality of Opportunity;
- Theme D – Administration and Reporting to support work under themes A-C.

The Executive Board Member provided examples of the work undertaken under the Community Cohesion Plan and advised that a revised action plan would be produced by March 2021 for the 2021/22 financial year as part of Welsh Government grant conditions.

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

- In response to a question on funding and the United Kingdom's recent withdrawal from the European Union, the Executive Board Member advised that previous grant funding had been received from the Welsh Government and it was hoped it would announce its continuance in March 2021

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Mid and West Wales Community Cohesion Action Plan be endorsed.

11. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

(Note: Cllr J Gilasbey had earlier declared an interest in this item and had been granted dispensation by the Standards Committee to speak only in respect of that interest)

The Committee considered a list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next scheduled meeting to be held on the 25th February 2021.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 25th February 2021 be noted.

10. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

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

- Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Report

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

12. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17TH DECEMBER 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 17th December, 2020 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE