

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 APRIL 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 11 April 2019

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Patrick Heesom, Dave Hughes, Paul Johnson, Hilary McGuill, Michelle Perfect, Vicky Perfect, Andy Williams and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Janet Axworthy (for Andrew Holgate) and Joe Johnson (for Paul Cunningham)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Bob Connah and Richard Jones

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Marion Bateman attended as an observer

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader and Cabinet Member for Education and Interim Cabinet Member for Finance; Councillor Billy Mullin, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management; Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Governance); Corporate Finance Manager; and Finance Manager

Revenues Manager - for minute number 99

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer

It was agreed that the Democratic Services Manager would write on behalf of the Committee to wish Councillor Cunningham a speedy recovery from his recent operation.

99. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

100. URGENT ITEM

The Committee noted the Chairman's decision to admit an urgent item as provided for under section 100B4 (b) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

In response to national press coverage on the Council Tax exemption for individuals diagnosed as 'severely mentally impaired', the Revenues Manager gave a statement on the position in Flintshire. Whilst the reports indicated low numbers of claimants in some areas of the UK, in Flintshire there were 527 households currently qualifying for the discount of which 185 were totally exempt. The remaining 342 were subject to a 25% discount as there was another adult living in those properties. The qualifying criteria was that an individual must be medically certified by a General Practitioner or consultant as having a permanent severe mental impairment, eg Dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's. Application

details were published on the Council's website and the Council Tax team was providing advice and sign-posting availability of the discount to residents.

The Chief Executive said that the information demonstrated that Flintshire, as a Dementia Friendly Council, was supporting local people well. To further offer support, officers would liaise with Health colleagues and the Flintshire Local Voluntary Council to consider how best to re-promote the discount. Local Members were encouraged to work with the Council to raise awareness amongst residents.

In response to queries, the Revenues Manager clarified that the discount applied to the applicant's main residence and that retrospective awards were based on the date that the individual was medically certified as severely mentally impaired. The main point of contact was the Council Tax Helpline (01352 704848) where specialist officer teams would provide assistance with any queries. The Revenues Manager and Team Manager could also be contacted if required.

The statement would be emailed to all Members following the meeting.

101. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 February 2019 were submitted.

Minute 89: Council Fund Budget 2019/20 - reference to the officer recommendations would be removed from Councillor Heesom's final sentence. Councillor Heesom also spoke about the need for Members to disassociate themselves with the views of officers about the increase in Council Tax as agreed in the budget.

Minute 90: Development of Capital Programme 2019/20-21/22 - Councillor Williams' comments on Theatr Clwyd would be amended for clarity.

Councillor Johnson moved that the minutes be approved with the two amendments, which was seconded by Councillor Hughes.

The Chairman took the opportunity to raise concerns that some Members were unaware of how to access password-protected Part 2 exempt reports on their iPads. Councillor Johnson said that Group Leaders should be reminded of the support available from the ICT team.

The Democratic Services Manager encouraged Members experiencing such difficulties to take note of the guidance which was periodically circulated or the offers of training and support from the ICT department.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendments, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

102. ACTION TRACKING

The Democratic Services Manager presented the progress report on actions arising from previous meetings and advised that the performance information workshop had been moved to 29 April.

As discussed at the February meeting, the Chief Executive had raised the suggested name change for Theatr Clwyd with senior members of the Board and the management team who would be retaining the brand for profile and continuity.

At the December 2018 meeting, Councillor Heesom had asked about further reports on the Flintshire Bridge due to his wider concerns about the implications on local road infrastructure and opportunities to influence those Welsh Government (WG) decisions. The Chief Executive repeated his response from that meeting including the commitment to share the cyclical report when the next inspection was due. The resource risks of future maintenance liability had been addressed in previous discussions.

The recommendations of the report were moved by Councillor Johnson.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

103. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. The following changes were agreed:

- The 2018/19 outturn report to be scheduled for July.
- The pay modelling report, incorporating Councillor Woolley's request on Job Evaluation Questionnaires and Job Descriptions, to be brought forward to May if possible.
- To remove the Revenue Budget Monitoring report from May to enable focus on early closure of the accounts, with an update on capital and revenue to be received in July.

Councillor Woolley commented that his previous suggestion on the Asset Register should be a separate item from the Asset Management Plan which was due in October. The Chief Executive asked that Councillor Woolley share the nature of his specific concerns if an earlier report was needed.

In response to Councillor Johnson's query on the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, the Chief Executive said that the core work was under the remit of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee. He suggested that the approach to scrutinising key decisions on Reserved Matters be discussed with Overview & Scrutiny Chairs once the Heads of Terms had been agreed during the Summer.

Councillor Johnson asked about arrangements for scrutinising decisions by Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and receiving reports back

from Council representatives on those groups. The Chief Executive said that specific activities could be considered by the relevant Overview & Scrutiny Committees. He suggested that the WLGA Leader and Chief Executive be invited to participate in a future Member workshop before the August recess to link with the Council's work on the budget.

Councillor Roberts explained that he provided feedback to the Education & Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the outcomes of national meetings that he attended in his capacity as Cabinet Member for Education. Whilst welcoming the additional funding for repairs and maintenance in schools and the costs provided for teachers' pensions, he raised concerns about the significant additional duties placed on schools and councils from Additional Learning Needs reform in Wales which was referenced in the next item.

Councillor Heesom welcomed further updates on the North Wales Growth Bid and encouraged all Members to access information on WLGA meetings.

It was acknowledged that the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee would maintain an overview and become involved in discussions as required.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor Johnson and seconded by Councillor Axworthy.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme, as amended, be approved; and
- (b) That the Democratic Services Manager, in consultation with the Committee Chairman, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises.

104. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) FORECAST UPDATE

The Chief Executive introduced an update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) forecast for 2020/21-2022/23 prior to consideration by Cabinet. A joint presentation with the Corporate Finance Manager covered the following:

- The financial forecast as at February 2019
- Review of pressures
 - Pay/workforce
 - Social care demands
 - Education pressures
 - Corporate financing pressures
 - Other pressures - updated and new
 - Risks
- Next steps
- Timeline

Since the report to County Council in February, the impact of reviewed existing pressures, new and emerging pressures and the additional use of reserves agreed at the budget stage had increased the forecasted budget gap for

2020/21 to £13.320m. There were a number of pressures including assumptions on teachers' pay, and the investment in Marleyfield Residential home and Holywell extra care which would help to meet service demand and offset further pressures. The estimated initial impact of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 was a new pressure with significant cost implications for all councils.

The Chief Executive advised that a large majority of the budget gap could only be funded by reform of national policy. The views of the Committee and Cabinet would help the cross-party group to work with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) in engaging with Welsh Government (WG). The evidence-based case for increased national funding consisted of three main building blocks:

1. Inflation protection against core costs e.g. pay and pensions;
2. Severe service pressures, e.g. Out of County Placements and Looked After Children; and
3. Full funding of new legislation e.g. Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Councillor Roberts highlighted the importance of the cross-party group working together to formulate a response to the Minister for Local Government including the need to provide funding for national pay awards.

Following a question by Councillor McGuill, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that unused allocations had been put back into reserves to maintain prudent levels but that some risks had exceeded the amount of funding available. He reminded Members that reserves were only for use on a one-off basis.

Councillor Axworthy spoke in support of a review of national funding policy. She suggested that the 2016 Commission on local government finance in Wales - to which Flintshire had been a primary contributor - be re-visited and tailored for relevance at this stage to support the case to WG. The Chief Executive said that there had been a lack of progress on the report's recommendations and confirmed that representations on the funding formula were within the terms of reference for the cross-party working group. He agreed that the report would be circulated to all Members as it was included in the reading list for the working group.

Councillor Heesom said that a mechanism was needed to ensure that respective Overview & Scrutiny Committees were satisfied with portfolio spend. In welcoming Member involvement on the budget, Councillor Roberts said that the majority of expenditure was outside the Council's control as it was directly allocated to support schools, social care, etc. He said that the Council Tax increase for 2019/20 had been a difficult decision for Members, despite the expectation from WG for a 6.5% increase across Wales, and he hoped that the Council would not be put in a similar position again. The way forward was to work together through the cross-party group and with other councils to make the funding case in advance of the budget-setting stage.

The Chief Executive said that notwithstanding the support of the cross-party group, there were no plans to revise the budget process which had received positive feedback from Members over several years. He reiterated the advice given throughout the process in 2018/19 that there were no further safe options remaining for service cost reductions of scale. There was a clear alignment of officers to Committees which determined their own workload.

In response to further comments, the Chief Executive said that whilst there had been some success on specific grants, the case remained for some to be included with the Settlement. He provided explanation on the transport anomalies referred to in the presentation.

Councillor Woolley recalled working with the WLGA in previous years to request that WG consider what proportion of funding should be held centrally and what was best allocated regionally and locally, and that this was still continuing. He said that the concerns raised by the Authority had been represented to WG by the WLGA since 2008 but had still not been addressed, and that national progress in resolution was unsatisfactory.

In acknowledging the value of the National Health Service, Councillor Roberts spoke about the link with social care services which should also be given priority for national funding.

Councillor Johnson welcomed the detailed overview of the forecast for 2020/21 and the high level forecast up to 2022/23, asking if more detail on the three year forecast could be shared with Overview & Scrutiny Committees to enable Members to see the direction of travel. Officers agreed and provided a brief overview of the approach to developing the forecast which evolved as pressures changed throughout the year.

The Corporate Finance Manager provided clarification to Councillor Bateman on projected parking and enforcement pressures based on existing usage.

Councillor McGuill urged officers to continue extending an invitation to Assembly Members to meet with the Council so that they could gain a greater understanding of the impact of WG decisions on local government budgets. Her comments were endorsed by Councillor Hughes.

The Democratic Services Manager gave assurance that ongoing attempts would continue. Members were asked to do their best to encourage AMs to take up the offer.

Following his earlier comments, Councillor Heesom questioned the Council's approach to controlling spend at an earlier stage in the budget process. In response, he was reminded that all six Overview & Scrutiny Committees had formally concluded, in agreement with officer advice, that no further safe options had been identified. The potential 15.2% increase in Council Tax which had been reported at an earlier stage had been reduced markedly as a result of an improved Final Settlement.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Woolley and seconded by Councillor Hughes.

A summary of the points raised would be reported to Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted and comments referred to Cabinet.

105. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2018/19 (MONTH (11))

The Corporate Finance Manager presented a report on the revenue budget monitoring position for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as at Month 11 prior to consideration by Cabinet. The report reflected the budget position at the close of the financial year and the outturn position due to be reported in July was not expected to significantly differ unless there were late changes to demand levels of services.

On the Council Fund, there was an operating surplus of £0.931m which was a positive movement of £0.188m compared with the previous month. As work was underway on closing the accounts, the risks of significant changes to the outturn had diminished. It was assessed that 96% of planned in-year efficiencies would be achieved by year-end.

On reserves and balances, taking into account the current projected underspend and previously agreed allocations, the balance on the Contingency Reserve was projected to be £8.715m. As previously agreed by Council, the amount used to assist in closing the budget gap on a one-off basis reduced the total available balance to £6.494m. Cabinet would be asked to approve allocations from the Contingency Reserve for investment in change and the new requirement to operate a Sustainable Drainage System Approving Body as set out in the report.

In seeking more clarity on budget variances, Councillor Heesom said it was crucial that the breakdown of portfolio expenditure appended to the report had been considered by the relevant Overview & Scrutiny Committees. The Chief Executive spoke about the impact on resources to take such an approach and that instead the practice was for each of the Committees to receive information on efficiencies and pressures within their respective portfolios in addition to budget issues arising as part of regular performance reporting. If there were concerns about a particular topic, they were signposted to the relevant Committee or at the request of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee as had been done previously.

Councillor Heesom requested an updated breakdown of Central and Corporate Finance expenditure. The Chief Executive said that a future report would be scheduled on the Forward Work Programme.

In response to Councillor Bateman's query on school delegated budgets, the Corporate Finance Manager would provide details of the percentage allocated to employee salaries which was the higher proportion of those budgets.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor Heesom and seconded by Councillor Johnson.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the recommendations made in the Cabinet report for 16 April and confirms that there are no concerns which it wishes to have raised at Cabinet this month.

106. FEEDBACK FROM THE MEMBER COMPLAINTS AND CASE HANDLING WORKSHOP

The Chief Executive introduced a report providing feedback and progress on actions from the Member workshop on complaints and case handling.

Councillor McGuill reported a problem receiving responses to repeat complaints which had been logged on the system.

Councillor Woolley advised that some members of the public had experienced difficulty contacting officers by telephone.

The Chairman said that a matter around the issuing of brown bin permits had resulted in residents giving up on long waits in trying to contact Streetscene. He had experienced the same when trying to resolve those residents' queries. He also spoke about the continued reluctance of some officers to include their Council mobile phone numbers within their email signature.

The Chief Officer (Governance) agreed to follow up the issues and advised that the guidelines had been re-circulated to officers. He referred to the impact of absences and vacancies within the Contact Centre during high demand for services and reported that Rebecca Jones had now been appointed as the strategic manager responsible for ensuring that the Contact Centre was operating effectively.

The Chief Executive provided explanation on the standards for agile working and the expectation for those individuals to be accessible. He asked that Members refer cases of repeated problems in accordance with the agreed arrangements.

Councillor Johnson suggested that Members' email addresses be changed to include 'cllr'. In response, the officers said that the title was evident from email address 'properties' and should be reflected on individual email signatures. As agreed at the workshop, responses to Members' complaints could only be prioritised for non-routine matters.

Councillor Heesom commended the workshop and the lead officer involved. He said it was important that Members were not restricted in making representations and that the word 'appropriate' be replaced with 'proportionate' on the list of general principles shown on the presentation slides.

It was agreed that an update on progress with the action plan would be scheduled for July.

The recommendations were moved by Councillor Woolley and seconded by Councillor Bateman.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the actions identified at the all Member workshop.

107. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 12.20pm)

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Chairman