

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
20 FEBRUARY 2024

Minutes of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Tuesday,
20 February 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Gladys Healey (Chair)

Councillors: Mike Allport, Glyn Banks, Pam Banks, Marion Bateman, Sean Bibby, Chris Bithell, Gillian Brockley, Helen Brown, Mel Buckley, Teresa Carberry, Tina Claydon, David Coggins Cogan, Geoff Collett, Steve Copple, Bill Crease, Paul Cunningham, Rob Davies, Ron Davies, Adele Davies-Cooke, Chris Dolphin, Rosetta Dolphin, Mared Eastwood, Carol Ellis, David Evans, Chrissy Gee, David Healey, Ian Hodge, Andy Hughes, Dave Hughes, Dennis Hutchinson, Alasdair Ibbotson, Paul Johnson, Christine Jones, Richard Jones, Simon Jones, Richard Lloyd, Dave Mackie, Gina Maddison, Roz Mansell, Allan Marshall, Hilary McGuill, Ryan McKeown, Billy Mullin, Debbie Owen, Ted Palmer, Andrew Parkhurst, Mike Peers, Michelle Perfect, Vicky Perfect, Carolyn Preece, David Richardson, Ian Roberts, Dan Rose, Kevin Rush, Dale Selvester, Jason Shallcross, Sam Swash, Linda Thew, Linda Thomas, Ant Turton, Roy Wakelam, Arnold Woolley and Antony Wren

APOLOGIES: Bernie Attridge and Ray Hughes

IN ATTENDANCE: Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (Education and Youth), Chief Officer (Social Services), Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy), Chief Officer (Housing and Assets), Corporate Finance Manager, Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development), Corporate Manager (Capital Programme and Assets), Revenues and Procurement Manager, Strategic Finance Managers, Regulatory Services Manager, Highway Network Manager, Service Delivery Manager, Democratic Services team and Father Paul Wheeler for prayers

76. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

One public question had been received from Matt Brown who was not present at the meeting. The question and response were circulated as follows:

Question

“Can the Administration explain why it decided to close all schools on Thursday, 8th February when every other neighbouring Local Authority, with the same Amber weather warning that includes Wrexham, Conway, Denbighshire, Cheshire West and Shropshire left the decision to close a school with the Headteacher and Governing body of that school?”

Response

“On Tuesday 6th February, a Yellow weather warning for snow and ice in Flintshire was issued, starting at 06:00 hrs on Thursday 08th February and continuing until 06:00hrs on Friday 09th February. At that point schools were advised that they would be expected to make their own decision regarding any school closure based on local conditions, in line with the adverse weather guidance.

However, when the weather warning was upgraded to Amber on Wednesday 7th February, outlining potentially more severe snow conditions in Flintshire from 08.00hrs to 15.00hrs on Thursday, this triggered a meeting of the Council's Emergency Management Response Team. The purpose of the meeting was: to consider the risk to the delivery of Council services for the following 24 hours in light of the yellow and amber weather warnings for snow and ice

- to agree any changes necessary to maintain essential service continuity and
- to ensure there were effective arrangements in place to protect the public, particularly those who are vulnerable.

An Amber warning means that **essential only travel is advised, and only if safe to do so**. EMRT based the decision to close schools on the anticipated impacts under the Amber weather alert which included;

- a good chance that some rural communities could be temporarily cut off
- travel delays on roads are likely, stranding some vehicles and passengers
- power cuts are possible and other services, such as mobile phone coverage, may be affected
- some delays and cancellations to rail travel are likely

There was a risk that the school transport network would be significantly disrupted, resulting in pupils not being able to safely travel to and from school, particularly as the Amber warning was due to come into effect at 8am when the road networks are at their busiest.

There was a particular risk for children with complex needs attending the County's Specialist schools, many of whom require escorts and whose health and wellbeing could be compromised if they were stuck in minibuses in adverse weather.

There was also a risk that as Mold was in the target area due to be adversely affected by heavy snow, this could impact on the delivery of a school meal service to those schools across the county whose meals are produced and delivered from the NEWydd Central Production Kitchen operating out of County Hall.

A further challenge for schools in adverse weather is that many staff travel considerable distances to their place of work, from within and beyond county borders. The potential reduction in the number of staff being present at their school in the event of adverse weather and travel conditions could have made it unsafe for schools to operate.

Because of the timing of the Amber Warning, a proactive response was taken rather than allowing a situation to develop that, based on the information would have most likely seen children stranded at bus stops or stranded in vehicles. Since the pandemic, schools have well developed IT platforms to delivery online learning. It was decided that it was more sensible to give parents time to make alternative childcare arrangements if needed and time for teachers to plan for online learning by making the decision to recommend school closure in

light of the detailed weather forecast rather than leave it until the Thursday morning and be faced with a chaotic situation.

Whilst we understand some parents and carers may have felt frustrated by the decision to close schools, others welcomed the proactive approach taken by the Council as it gave them sufficient time to plan suitable childcare arrangements and they welcomed the fact that the Council was actively considering the safety of their children. Headteachers across Flintshire have been unanimous in their support of the Council's decision as there is no more difficult situation for a Head to be anticipating significant snowfall and wondering whether they will be able to open their school safely, or not or even more challenging, open in the morning and then have to close during the day and get children home safely.

Each Local Authority will have undertaken its own risk assessment and we're not in a position to comment on what were the reasons behind the decisions made in other authorities.

Although, on the day, the snowfall was not as significant in many parts of the county as the forecast had predicted, the decision to close schools was taken in the best interests for the communities we serve with the information we had at the time."

77. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Members declared a personal interest on the Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 (agenda item 11) due to closely associated people employed by the Council: Councillors Chris Bithell, Gillian Brockley, Mel Buckley, David Coggins Cogan, Adele Davies-Cooke, Dennis Hutchinson, Christine Jones, Simon Jones, Roz Mansell, Hilary McGuill, Ted Palmer, Andrew Parkhurst, Carolyn Preece, Kevin Rush, Dale Selvester and Linda Thomas.

On Council Fund Budget 2024/25 (agenda item 7), Councillor Hilary McGuill declared a personal and prejudicial as a Board Member of NEW Homes. Councillors Glyn Banks and Ted Palmer declared a personal interest on the same item.

78. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2024 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Sean Bibby and Teresa Carberry.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record.

79. CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Chair's Communications covering events attended since the previous meeting were circulated prior to the meeting.

80. PETITIONS

None.

81. COUNCIL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2024/25 - FINAL CLOSING STAGE

The Chief Executive and Corporate Finance Manager gave a detailed presentation based on the report submitted to Cabinet earlier in the day, which covered the following:

- Setting a legal and balanced budget
- The journey so far...
- Further changes to the additional budget requirement 2024/25
- Additional Budget Requirement 2024/25
- Budget Solutions
 - Aggregate External Finance (AEF)
 - Portfolio Cost Reductions
 - Schools - Cost Reductions
 - Other Cost Reductions
 - Council Tax
 - Final Proposed Solutions
 - Other Budget Option (submitted by the Independent Group)
- Council Tax 2024/25
- Schools and Social Care Budgets
- Open Risks in 2024/25
- Reserves
- Professional Opinions and Concluding Remarks
- Looking Forward
- Next Steps and Timelines

The presentation detailed changes since the position reported in January which had taken into account the financial impact of the Welsh Local Government Provisional Settlement (LGPS). Following two Member briefings and additional cost reduction proposals being considered by Overview & Scrutiny committees, work had continued to review the overall position in conjunction with a recent announcement from Welsh Government (WG) on an expected consequential from UK Government. The outcome of that work was detailed in the Cabinet report with final proposed solutions to set out how the Council could achieve a legal and balanced budget for 2024/25. The proposed budget included an overall annual 8% increase on Council Tax for Council services and 1.1% for additional contributions to North Wales Fire and Rescue Service and the Regional Coroners Service. This equated to an overall uplift of 9.1% which provided overall additional net yield of £9.072m in 2024/25. Analysis of this proposal and an option submitted by the Independent Group - which required the utilisation of the additional WG AEF with an overall Council Tax increase of 9.0% - was explained in the presentation.

A number of significant open risks were highlighted for 2024/25 together with an update on reserves including a reminder of the importance of building and maintaining reserves to safeguard against open risks and for the medium term in view of the reduced settlements expected for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

The Chief Executive concluded the presentation by reflecting on the increased risks and challenges arising from the poor settlement by WG and the need for increased fiscal control in 2024/25 to respond to anticipated future reduced financial settlements, with greater emphasis on service transformation and cost reduction.

As Leader of the Council, Councillor Ian Roberts thanked everyone for their input on the challenging budget situation and echoed officers' concerns about the future financial position of local government. Following the Cabinet meeting and discussions with the Independent Group earlier in the day, he moved the alternative budget set out in paragraph 1.25 of the report which included an annual overall 9.0% increase in Council Tax.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor Richard Jones who thanked officers, particularly those in the Finance team, for working with the Independent Group on the alternative budget. He recognised the administration for supporting the proposal and referred to the impact of the funding formula which was in urgent need of review by WG.

Councillor Paul Johnson acknowledged the difficult decisions needed to set a legal and balanced budget. He spoke about the impact of inflationary pressures, increased service demand and poor settlements and the importance of strengthening reserves to safeguard against risks.

The efforts of both political groups in reaching agreement on such a challenging situation were recognised by Councillor David Healey who called for all Members to work together.

In response to questions from Councillor David Coggins Cogan, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that the provisional AEF uplift had been lower than anticipated due to revised late data sets prior to the calculation of the formula. He also provided information on expectations for the Council's allocation from the WG consequential which had been included in funding estimates, advising that any change would be accommodated from reserves.

Reference was made by Councillor Mike Peers to the Council again being amongst the lowest funded authorities per capita in Wales resulting in the financial burden placed on residents. He paid tribute to Councillors Richard Jones and Ian Roberts for agreeing on what he described as a collaborative budget.

Comments were made by Councillor Andrew Parkhurst about the lack of leadership on the budget and the delay in transformational change by the administration. He went on to speak in support of the protection of small rural schools.

Councillor Carol Ellis spoke about the effect of the low settlement from WG on the Council and residents. She also expressed disappointment at the poor attendance by Members of the Senedd at a recent meeting which had taken place.

Councillor Bill Crease spoke about the increasing difficulties for the Council in light of the below average settlement from WG.

Councillor Chris Bithell referred to the erosion of funding from the Revenue Support Grant over the years and the unfairness of the funding formula which was not sustainable.

Councillor Sam Swash expressed disappointment that some of his suggestions raised during the process had not been taken. He questioned why a number of departmental underspends had not been addressed as part of the budget solutions and spoke against specific actions which he felt did not benefit Flintshire's communities or residents.

Councillor Glyn Banks also commented on the unfairness of the funding formula and the inevitable impact on Council Tax.

In exercising his right of reply, Councillor Roberts acknowledged the impact on schools and residents and gave assurance that robust challenges had been made at ministerial level on the financial situation.

A recorded vote requested by Councillor Andy Hughes was not supported by the requisite number of Members.

Having already been moved and seconded, the Cabinet recommendations as follows were put to the vote and carried, based on the alternative budget option set out in paragraph 1.25:

1. That Cabinet notes and approves the revised additional budget requirement for 2024/25;
2. That Cabinet approves the final proposals for the cost reductions that will contribute to the budget;
3. That Cabinet recommends to Council a legal and balanced budget based on the calculations and two options set out within the report;
4. That Cabinet notes the significant open risks which remain to be managed in the 2024/25 financial year;
5. That Cabinet recommends an overall annual increase in Council Tax for 2024/25 based on the two options provided;
6. That Cabinet invites Council to pass the formal Council Tax resolution now that we have had notification of the precepts of the Police and Crime Commissioner and all Town and Community Councils within Flintshire; and
7. That Cabinet notes the medium-term forecast as a basis for the next revision of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

Councillor Adele Davies-Cooke requested that her vote against be recorded.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the recommendations of Cabinet for balancing the budget for 2024/25 be approved, based on the alternative option set out in paragraph 1.25 of the report; and
- (b) That the level of Council Tax for 2024/25 as recommended by Cabinet be approved, based on the alternative option for an overall annual increase of 9.0%.

82. COUNCIL TAX SETTING FOR 2024/25

A report was received to formally set the Council Tax charges and associated statutory resolutions for 2024/25 as part of the wider budget strategy on the basis of the decision taken on the previous item. The overall level of Council Tax comprised three separate precepts set by (i) the County Council, (ii) the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for North Wales and (iii) all Town/Community Councils, which made up the total sum charged against each property. The report indicated the precepts to be raised by the Council based on an increase of either 9.0% or 9.1% as detailed in the previous report.

The recommendations, based on the option for a 9.0% uplift, were moved and seconded by Councillors Richard Jones and Helen Brown.

The Chief Officer (Governance) advised that an amendment subsequently moved by Councillor David Coggins Cogan on changing the premium for long-term empty homes was invalid due to the decision reached on the previous agenda item. It was further advised by the Revenues and Procurement Manager that such a decision at this stage would raise a number of significant risks for the Council and that an alternative premium scheme would need to be introduced from April 2025 to allow for the necessary consultation, should Members wish to progress.

Councillor Helen Brown spoke in support of the request which would bring long-term empty properties back into use.

The Chief Officer (Governance) advised that the amendment should have been moved as part of Council Tax considerations within the Budget 2024/25 and that Members may wish to consider the suggestion made by the Revenues and Procurement Manager to follow the legal process as a way forward.

In response to further comments, the Corporate Finance Manager endorsed the advice given by officers and explained the implications of changing the Council Tax base at this stage, having already approved the budget.

Councillor Coggins Cogan subsequently withdrew his amendment.

Following Councillors Jones and Brown withdrawing their motion, Councillor Johnson moved the recommendations in the report based on an overall annual increase of 9.0% with an addition that Cabinet instigate a review of

the Council Tax premium scheme for long-term empty properties and second homes over the next 12 months. He was seconded by Councillor Chris Bithell.

Having been moved and seconded, this was put to the vote and carried.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the 2024/25 Council Tax be set based on a 9.0% uplift in the County Council charges, as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report;
- (b) That the continuation of the policy of not providing a discount in the level of 2024/25 Council Tax charges for second homes and long-term empty homes be endorsed. Also, where exceptions do not apply, to charge the Council Tax Premium rate of 75% above the standard rate of Council Tax for designated long-term empty dwellings and 100% for second homes from 1st April 2024;
- (c) That approval be given for designated officers to issue legal proceedings and appear on behalf of the Council in the Magistrates' Court for unpaid taxes; and
- (d) That Cabinet reviews the Council Tax premium scheme for long-term empty properties and second homes over the next 12 months.

At this point, the Chair called for a brief adjournment prior to the remaining items.

83. TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2024/25

The Corporate Finance Manager presented the draft Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 for approval.

No significant changes had been made to the Strategy since the previous year and no specific issues had been raised following consideration by the Governance & Audit Committee and Cabinet.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Johnson and Glyn Banks.

RESOLVED:

That the Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25 be approved.

84. MINIMUM REVENUE PROVISION - 2024/25 POLICY

Members received a report to approve the annual policy for the Minimum Revenue Provision for the prudent repayment of debt.

On being put to the vote, the recommendations were carried.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the following be approved for Council Fund (CF):-

- Option 3 (Asset Life Method) be used for the calculation of the MRP in financial year 2024/25 for the balance of outstanding capital expenditure funded from supported borrowing fixed as at 31st March 2017. The calculation will be the 'annuity' method over 49 years.
- Option 3 (Asset Life Method) be used for the calculation of the MRP in 2024/25 for all capital expenditure funded from supported borrowing from 1st April 2016 onwards. The calculation will be the 'annuity' method over an appropriate number of years, dependent on the period of time that the capital expenditure is likely to generate benefits.
- Option 3 (Asset Life Method) be used for the calculation of the MRP in 2024/25 for all capital expenditure funded from unsupported (prudential) borrowing or credit arrangements, including MIM. The calculation will be the 'annuity' method over an appropriate number of years, dependent on the period of time that the capital expenditure is likely to generate benefits.

(b) That the following be approved for Housing Revenue Account (HRA):-

- Option 3 (Asset Life Method) be used for the calculation of the HRA's MRP in 2024/25 for the balance of outstanding capital expenditure funded from debt fixed as at 31st March 2021. The calculation will be the 'annuity' method over 50 years.
- Option 3 (Asset Life Method) be used for the calculation of the HRA's MRP in 2024/25 for all capital expenditure funded from debt from 1st April 2021 onwards. The calculation will be the 'annuity' method over an appropriate number of years, dependent on the period of time that the capital expenditure is likely to generate benefits.

(c) That MRP on loans from the Council to NEW Homes to build affordable homes through the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP) (which qualify as capital expenditure in accounting terms) be approved as follows:-

- No MRP is made during the construction period (of short duration) as the asset has not been brought into use and no benefit is being derived from its use.
- Once the assets are brought into use, capital (loan) repayments will be made by NEW Homes. The Council's MRP will be equal to the repayments made by NEW Homes. The repayments made by NEW Homes will be classed, in accounting terms, as capital receipts, which can only be used to fund capital expenditure or repay debt. The capital repayment / capital receipt will be set aside to repay debt and is the Council's MRP policy for repaying the loan.

85. PAY POLICY STATEMENT FOR 2024/25

The Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development) presented the Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 to enable publication within the statutory deadline. This was the twelfth annual statement published by the Council and reflected current agreements and arrangements regarding pay, incorporating updates as set out in the report. Prior to publication, the introduction of the Equal Pay Audit would be amended to reflect that this was the eight pay audit.

Councillors Chris Bithell and Dennis Hutchinson welcomed actions to further reduce the overall gender pay gap where work of equal value was being done.

On being put to the vote, the recommendations were carried.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 be approved; and
- (b) That delegated authority be given to the Corporate Manager (People and Organisational Development) to update the Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 during the year to reflect any changes required by legislation, Government policy or national negotiations so that it remains accurate and current.

86. QUESTIONS

None received.

87. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS ON COMMITTEE MINUTES

None received.

88. NOTICE OF MOTION

None received.

89. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were two members of the public present at the start of the meeting.

(The meeting started at 1pm and ended at 4pm)

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Chair