

CABINET
19TH DECEMBER 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet of Flintshire County Council held virtually via Zoom on Tuesday 19th December 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader in the Chair)

Councillors: Sean Bibby, Chris Bithell, Mared Eastwood, Dave Healey, Paul Johnson, Christine Jones and Billy Mullin.

IN ATTENDANCE:

Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy), Chief Officer (Social Services), Chief Officer (Housing and Communities), Corporate Finance Manager, Corporate Manager – Capital Programme and Assets, Corporate Manager, People and Organisational Development, Strategic Finance Manager and Team Leader – Democratic Services.

OTHER MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillors: Bernie Attridge and David Coggins Cogan.

APOLOGIES:

Councillors: Billy Mullin and Ian Roberts.

87. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

88. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21st November were submitted and confirmed as a correct record.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting be approved as a correct record.

89. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) AND BUDGET 2024/25

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which provided an update on the Council's revenue budget position for the 2024/25 financial year in advance of the receipt of the Welsh Local Government Provisional Settlement on 20th December.

The revised cost pressures and cost reduction options to date were referred to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees throughout October, at which time there was an estimated funding gap of £14.042m. Feedback from those meetings was reported back to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16th November. In addition, two Member workshops were held on 5th and 10th October.

The report set out the changes to the 2024/25 additional budget requirement since the last reported position in September. The report also updated on the progress made to identify solutions to bridge the remaining budget gap. Following receipt of the provisional settlement a briefing would be provided to Members to advise of the impact on the overall 2024/25 budget position.

Whilst progress had been made it should be noted that the Council still had a major challenge to identify the remaining solutions that would enable it to agree a legal and balanced budget by March next year which it continued to address with urgency.

The Chief Executive reiterated the bleak position across Wales going into 2024/25. He commented on the work on planning that had commenced on delivering a strategic programme of service transformation to ensure that the Council was developing cost reductions over the next five years in order to protect its ongoing future financial position and ensure it was further prepared for inevitable future budget challenges. Whilst those workstreams were to provide financial support from 2025/26 onwards, they did not assist with the immediate budget challenges for 2024/25.

Areas that could fall in the scope of transformation work were outlined in the report. The list was not exhaustive and future engagement with Members would be important to ensure that there was an opportunity to contribute and positively influence the programme of activity and ensure that it was progressed on a timely basis.

The Corporate Finance Manager explained that the biggest new pressure was the increase in the cost of Free School Meals (term time) as well as increased demand in the current financial year.

With a remaining gap of £11m, he reiterated the comments of the Chief Executive and the areas that needed to be looked at as part of the Strategic Programme of Transformation. Each portfolio was also looking at how they could achieve 5% of efficiencies.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the revised additional budget requirement for the 2024/25 financial year be received and noted; and
- (b) That the progress made and the ongoing work on budget solutions that continue to be urgently addressed to enable the Council to set a legal and balanced budget by March 2024 be noted.

90. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) 30 YEAR FINANCIAL BUSINESS PLAN

Councillor Bibby introduced the report which presented the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) 30-year Financial Business Plan and the proposed HRA Budget for 2024/25.

The strategic context for this year's HRA budget setting included the following:

- Ensure affordability for tenants is at the core of our considerations
- Continued drive to ensure all service costs are efficient and that value for money can be achieved
- Ensure the treasury management strategy continues to meet the HRA's new and ongoing borrowing requirements
- Setting a balanced budget with a minimum of 3% surplus revenue over expenditure
- Maximisation of revenue efficiencies to minimise the borrowing required to meet Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS)
- Delivery of new build Council housing
- Continued drive to ensure homes are Energy Efficient and explore Decarbonisation
- Provision of adequate ongoing capital to maintain WHQS levels.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) explained that the report had been submitted to Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee and feedback was that the service charge for aerials be frozen which was reflected in the Cabinet report and recommendation (d), and that a hardship fund be set up which was reflected in the report recommendation (e). She added at the Welsh Government (WG) rent cap for social housing was 6.7%, with Flintshire's proposed increase being 6.5%. The garage rent increase was also lower than the WG cap.

The Strategic Finance Manager expressed the need to focus on affordability. WHQS 2 had just been announced which proposed to reduce the carbon emissions from social housing and in doing so, contribute to the Welsh target of Net Zero Carbon. There was no funding from WG to support that so the Council needed to ensure the HRA could cover the cost of those works.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2024/25 be considered;
- (b) That the proposed minimum rent increase of 6.5% be approved;
- (c) That the garage rent increase of 6.5% be approved;
- (d) That the increase in service charges to full cost recovery with the exception of aerial charges which will be frozen until a new contract is negotiated be approved;
- (e) That the tenant hardship fund be topped up to a cap of £0.350m from any surplus reserves generated in year, if required; and
- (f) That the proposed Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme for 2024/25 be approved.

91. DRAFT STRATEGIC EQUALITY PLAN 2024-28

The Corporate Manager, Capital Programme and Assets, introduced the report which presented the Council's draft equality objectives and Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28 for endorsement prior to formal consultation.

All devolved public authorities in Wales were required by the Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011 to publish equality objectives and a Strategic Equality Plan every four years.

Engagement must take place with people with protected characteristics when setting equality objectives and preparing and reviewing the Strategic Equality Plan. The aim of the Strategic Equality Plan was to reduce inequalities and ensure the delivery of positive outcomes for people with protected characteristics.

The Strategic Equality Plan for the period 2024-28 must be finalised and published by 1st April 2024.

The proposed equality objectives for 2024-28 were:

- Improve health, well-being and social care outcomes, including outcomes for older people and disabled people
- Reduce gaps in educational attainment between protected groups and implement strategies to improve well-being
- Ensure equal pay within the workplace by having fair, open and transparent grading and salary strategies in place
- Improve personal safety for all protected groups
- Increase access to services and decision making for all protected groups
- Improve living standards of people with different protected characteristics
- Reduce the impact of poverty and embed the Socio-economic Duty within the organisation

Consultation would begin in January for a period of six weeks following which a report would be submitted to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

When considered at Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee it was noted that the email address within the document was incorrect. That would be rectified prior to the consultation commencing.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28 be approved before wider consultation with stakeholders, members of the public, and employees; and
- (b) That the draft Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28 be presented to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their consideration and review.

92. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24 (MONTH 7)

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which provided Members with the first detailed overview of the budget monitoring position for the 2023/24 financial year for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account and presented the position, based on actual income and expenditure as at Month 7.

The projected year end position was as follows:

Council Fund

- An operating deficit of £3.671m (excluding the impact of the pay award which would need to be met by reserves – currently estimated as £2.727m) which was an adverse movement of £0.112m from the deficit figure reported at Month 6, but now included the estimated net impact of Storm Babet
- A projected contingency reserve available balance as at 31st March 2024 of £3.664m (after the estimated impact of pay awards and taking account of previously approved allocations)

Housing Revenue Account

- Net in-year revenue expenditure was forecast to be (£0.100m) lower than budget which was a favourable movement of (£0.031m) from the figure reported at Month 6
- A projected closing balance as at 31st March, 2024 of £3.297m

The Corporate Finance Manager explained that the economic outlook remained challenging due to inflation levels remaining high. The impacts of that, together with continued increases in service demand was becoming increasingly hard to deal with as the Councils funding failed to keep up with the scale of those pressures.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report and the estimated financial impact on the 2023/24 budget be noted; and
- (b) That the transfer of a £0.500m Earmarked Reserve balance relating to Council Tax Income to the Contingency Reserve be approved.

93. TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW 2023/24

Councillor Johnson introduced the report which presented the draft Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2023/24.

As required by the Council's Financial Procedure Rules, the report was reviewed by the Governance and Audit Committee on 22nd November 2023 where officers responded to questions to the satisfaction of the Committee and there were no specific issues to bring to the attention of Cabinet.

It was recommended that the report be presented to County Council on 23rd January 2024 for final approval.

RESOLVED:

That the draft Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2023/24 be recommended to County Council on 23rd January for final approval.

94. BUSINESS RATES WRITE OFFS

The Chief Officer (Governance) introduced the report and explained that bad debts above £25,000 required Cabinet to approve recommendations to write off those debts.

Two Business Rates debts, totalling £118,266.44, were deemed to be irrecoverable and the writing off the debts was now a necessary step. The debts related to:

- PPA Engineering Group Ltd £92,489.86
- Gibbs (Steel Fabricators) Ltd £25,776.58

RESOLVED:

That the write off of the business rate debts, amounting to £92,489 for PPA Engineering Group Ltd and £25,776 for Gibbs (Steel Fabricators) Ltd. be approved.

95. SHELTERED HOUSING REVIEW

Councillor Bibby introduced the report which provided an update on the Council's sheltered housing review, the proposed methodology and scoring matrix and the communication and engagement plan.

The Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) housing stock consisted of circa 7,300 properties with approximately 2,500 of those being classed as sheltered stock. With future standards increasing in terms of the Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS), Welsh Government's ambitions with regards to decarbonisation, the need to ensure sheltered properties continued to meet the contract holders needs and the costs associated with investment and future maintenance, the Council were now required to ensure that any future expenditure was allocated appropriately. The options for those sheltered assets deemed to require significant investment to comply with current and future standards or were no longer meeting the needs of contract holders, were redesignation to general needs, refurbishment or demolition.

The review would adopt a holistic approach to the sustainability of the sheltered housing stock and reviewed each scheme from an asset management perspective to identify the current and future investment needs of each scheme, WHQS works and de-carbonisation and compliance considerations.

That information would be aligned to housing management intelligence and insight which would review and assess demand / turnover and desirability to

determine the sustainability of each scheme. Each scheme would be assessed against a sustainability matrix with four possible recommendations, each of which were outlined in the report.

It was important for the Council to ensure that its offer to current, and prospective, sheltered housing contract holders was attractive, competitive and meets current expectations and aspirations. It had been several years since the Council last reviewed its offer to sheltered housing contract holders and it was timely that the offer was updated.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Communities) said that following a report to Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2023, it was requested that a Sheltered Housing Review Task and Finish Group be established. That group had met on three occasions to consider the Terms of Reference, the Scoring Matrix and the Communications and Engagement Plan. That Scoring Matrix and Communications and Engagement Plan were outlined in the report which had also been considered and supported at Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee the previous week.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the methodology proposed to assess the Council's sheltered assets be supported;
- (b) That the communication and engagement plan proposed to assess the Council's sheltered assets be supported; and
- (c) That the future assessment work to sheltered housing assets and progress to an options appraisal stage if investment concerns are highlighted through its in-depth review be supported.

96. PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES ANNUAL LETTER 2022-23 AND COMPLAINTS MADE AGAINST FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL DURING THE FIRST HALF OF 2023-24

The Chief Officer (Governance) introduced the report, the purpose of which was to share the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Annual Letter 2022-23 for Flintshire County Council.

The Ombudsman's Annual Letter provided an overview of the annual performance of the Council in relation to complaints received between 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023. The report also provided an overview of complaints received by each portfolio of the Council between 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023.

The Customer Contact Manager explained that the number of complaints against local authorities across Wales reduced by 11% in 2022-23 compared to the previous year and the Ombudsman intervened with 13% of complaints, a reduction from 18% the year before.

Appended to the report was a link to the Annual Letter detailing Flintshire's performance and comparative data. The paragraphs in the report provided a summary of performance and additional context in response to the findings.

Matthew Harris, Head of the Complaints Standards Authority at the Ombudsman's office had no particular comments to make and referred to the Council being selected to be part of the Ombudsman's second wider Own Initiative Investigation looking into the administration of carer needs assessments. Details of what the investigation would consider were outlined in the report.

In response to a question from Councillor Bithell, the Customer Contact Manager said she would provide clarity on the details in the appendix outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the annual performance of the Council in respect of complaints made to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales during 2022-23 be noted;
- (b) That the half year performance of the Council (2023-24) in respect of complaints made against services in line with the concerns and complaints procedure; and
- (c) That the priorities outlined in paragraph 1.24 be supported.

97. INTRODUCING A CORPORATE FACEBOOK PAGE

The Chief Officer (Governance) introduced the report and explained that having a social media presence via a corporate Facebook account would support Flintshire's ambitious Digital Strategy and the achievement of other key strategic plans by way of communicating and engaging with customers across Flintshire.

The Customer Service & Communications Team would launch and manage separate English and Welsh corporate Facebook accounts, posting simultaneously, to use for emergency communications, sharing key messages, good news stories, as well as consultation and engagement activities from across the organisation.

In response to a comment from Councillor Bithell, the Chief Officer explained that the Council would be able to remove any posts that were not relevant or, for example, were abusive.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the introduction of a corporate Facebook account to help achieve priorities outlined in the Council Plan and Digital Strategy be supported;
- (b) That Cabinet champion the introduction of a corporate Facebook account and use the platform to share messages with customers.

98. EXERCISE OF DELEGATED POWERS

None.

99. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the public in attendance.

(The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and ended at 11.00 a.m.)

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Chair