

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
8 FEBRUARY 2024

Minutes of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a hybrid meeting on Thursday, 8 February 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Richard Jones (Chair)

Councillors: Bill Crease, Alasdair Ibbotson, Allan Marshall, Vicky Perfect, Kevin Rush, Jason Shallcross, Sam Swash, Linda Thomas and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Ryan McKeown (for Gina Maddison) and Linda Thew (for Bernie Attridge)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Helen Brown, David Coggins Cogan, David Evans and Andrew Parkhurst were in attendance for agenda item 6 (Council Fund Budget 2024/25) together with Cabinet Members: Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy), Councillor Mared Eastwood (Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure) and Councillor David Healey (Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Economy)

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts (Leader of the Council), Councillor Christine Jones (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Services and Wellbeing), Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion and Resilient Communities), Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Corporate Finance Manager, Strategic Finance Managers, Corporate Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) and Corporate Manager (Capital Programme and Assets)

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager and team

66. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

67. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 14 December 2023 and 11 January 2024 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Linda Thomas and Bill Crease.

The Chair reflected on his comments at the December meeting regarding the time available to set the budget for 2024/25 and the challenges for portfolios.

RESOLVED:

That both sets of minutes be approved as a correct record.

68. ACTION TRACKING

The Democratic Services Manager presented an update on actions from previous meetings.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Jason Shallcross and Vicky Perfect.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

69. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration.

The recommendations were moved and seconded by Councillors Kevin Rush and Bill Crease.

RESOLVED:

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

70. VARIATION IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chair indicated that there would be a change in the order of business to bring forward agenda item 7 prior to considering the Council Fund Budget item in closed session.

71. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24 (MONTH 9) AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2023/24 (MONTH 9)

The Strategic Finance Managers presented the 2023/24 month 9 position for the revenue budget monitoring for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the Capital Programme, prior to consideration by Cabinet.

Revenue Budget Monitoring

On the Council Fund, the projected year-end position was an operating deficit of £2.502m which was a favourable movement of £0.440m from the deficit position reported at month 8. This would leave a year-end contingency reserve balance of £5.108m after the actual impact of pay awards and previously approved allocations. As a result of the continued moratorium on non-contractually committed spend and vacancy management process, £1.548m of deferred and/or delayed expenditure had been identified at month 9. Changes to approved budgets since month 8 were summarised along with significant variances, in-year risks/emerging issues and other tracked risks as detailed in the

report. The position on unearmarked reserves included an adjustment to the projected Council Tax balance which had been overstated at month 8.

On the HRA, projected in-year expenditure of £0.049m higher than budget would leave a closing un-earmarked balance of £3.148m, which was above the recommended guidelines on spend.

On the carry-forward request for Planning, Environment & Economy, Councillor Alasdair Ibbotson asked whether the Council could retain its ability to issue local by-laws or enforce previous ones in excess of the standards for Special Procedures. Officers agreed to pursue a response from the portfolio.

The Chief Officer (Governance) responded to a question on the carry-forward request under his portfolio and suggested that further clarification be given in more detail in closed session prior to the next agenda item. Finance officers confirmed that assumptions in the budget calculations were based on approval of both carry-forward requests.¹

The Chair referred to in-year risks and questioned the effectiveness of continued lobbying to Welsh Government (WG) on fairer funding.

On Out of County Placements, Councillor Christine Jones said that work being undertaken to address pressures in demand and market conditions was starting to make a positive impact over the longer term.

Councillor Paul Johnson gave assurance that robust representations continued to be made by Chief Officers and Cabinet Members and that progress was being made by the Fairer Funding Working Group.

On portfolio budgets, Councillor Bill Crease said that the approach to forecasting should be reviewed for service areas with overspends year on year.

Capital Programme Monitoring

The revised programme for 2023/24 was £92.859m taking into account all carry forward sums and savings transferred back to the programme. Changes during the period were mainly due to the introduction of grant funding streams and budget re-profiling. The projected outturn position totalled £91.049m leaving a £1.810m underspend recommended to be carried forward for the completion of schemes in 2024/25 as detailed. The report detailed savings identified during the period and no additional allocations. The overall funding position of approved schemes indicated a surplus of £2.312m prior to the realisation of additional capital receipts and/or other funding sources.

¹ In relation to the response by Finance Officers on the budget calculations for the carry forward requests, the advice on the £0.050m carry forward request for PE&E was correct. However, the actual position regarding the £0.210m request for Governance was that the projected outturn position did not include the carry forward request being approved at Month 9. Therefore, based on this being approved, it would reduce the Governance underspend by £0.210m at Month 10. The position regarding financial assumptions for further carry forward requests will be clarified alongside each request within future monthly reports.

The second recommendation was moved and seconded by the Chair and Councillor Bill Crease.

RESOLVED:

That having considered the Capital Programme Monitoring 2023/24 (month 9) report, the Committee confirms that there are no specific matters to be raised with Cabinet.

72. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 - TO CONSIDER THE EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

To enable a fuller discussion on the requested transfer to the Digital Strategy reserve, exclusion of the press and public was moved and seconded by Councillors Bill Crease and Jason Shallcross.

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting as the following item was considered to be exempt by virtue of paragraph 15 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

73. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24 (MONTH 9)

In response to questions, the Chief Officer (Governance) provided clarification on funding arrangements for the Digital Strategy and the implications if the carry-forward request was not approved by Cabinet.

In noting the benefits of website improvements, Councillor Alasdair Ibbotson spoke about the need to focus on critical services of most value. On that basis, he proposed that the Committee recommend that Cabinet reject the carry-forward request and went on to suggest a possible virement from other elements of the Investment in Organisational Change earmarked reserve to support work on the Digital Strategy.

Concerns were raised by Councillor Linda Thew on potential streamlining processes at Connects Centres.

Councillor Bill Crease spoke in support of Councillor Ibbotson's proposal.

In responding to a point on income generation, the Chief Officer advised of suggested savings from resourcing the temporary Digital Strategy posts.

Councillor Ibbotson clarified that whilst there was no issue with the carry-forward request from Planning, Environment & Economy, his concerns about the request from Governance remained.

The Chair moved that the amendment include that any carry-forward request should be risk assessed against elements of other portfolio budgets to allow Cabinet to consider all options. This was seconded by Councillor Ibbotson.

RESOLVED:

That having considered the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2023/24 (month 9) report, the Committee recommends:

- (a) that Cabinet rejects the Governance carry-forward request;
- (b) that Cabinet commissions a risk assessment of rejecting the Planning, Environment & Economy carry-forward request; and
- (c) that any carry-forward request should be risk assessed against elements of other portfolio budgets.

74. COUNCIL FUND BUDGET 2024/25

The Corporate Finance Manager presented a report to consider additional proposals for Corporate Services, Assets Service and Governance portfolio towards meeting the remaining budget gap of £12.946m reported at the previous meeting.

Following receipt of the disappointing Local Government Provisional Settlement, all portfolios had been tasked with reviewing their cost base to identify potential ways of reducing budgets or removing cost pressure to contribute more to meeting the remaining gap. Members were reminded of a number of ongoing risks which were being monitored and could change the additional budget requirement further. Comments from Overview & Scrutiny committees on their respective areas would be collated for the final budget-setting reports to Cabinet and County Council on 20 February.

Table 1 - Corporate Services budget reductions

The Chair shared his concerns about the future consequences of the option for the Flintshire Trainee programme. The Corporate Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) provided context by advising that the proposal to reduce the cohort for 2024/25 would have a minimal impact as those trainees would have been under-resourced during the period. This assisted the Committee in considering the recommendations.

On the fees and charges review, the Chair was advised that the amount related to 2024 and reflected an estimate of the part year figure from October 2024.

Clarity was given to Councillor Andrew Parkhurst on the estimated total for the Trade Union support budget. On statutory requirements, the Corporate Manager (Human Resources and Organisational Development) said that whilst the Council had always recognised trade unions as an employer, she would check on the definitive statutory position and respond separately.

Table 2 - Assets Service budget reductions

Following explanation on the budget reduction for Policy detailed in the report, the Chair said that reductions made for third sector funding could potentially put pressure on Council services. Positive contributions by the third

sector on the delivery of Council services were acknowledged by the Chief Executive and the Chair.

Table 3 - Governance budget reductions

In response to a question from Councillor Alasdair Ibbotson, the Chief Officer (Governance) provided information on the impact on communications with the public arising from the GovDelivery software efficiency option if the carry-forward request for the Digital Strategy was not approved by Cabinet.

Following debate, the recommendation for the Assets Service was moved and seconded by the Chair and Councillor Bill Crease. The recommendations for Corporate Services and Governance, as amended, were moved and seconded by Councillor Ibbotson and the Chair.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee accepts the Assets Service options to reduce budgets; and
- (b) That having considered the options to reduce budgets in Corporate Services and Governance, the Committee expresses provisional reservations and reluctance in accepting the proposed reductions for Flintshire Trainees and Connects (reduction in budget) but expresses a provisional willingness to accept the removal of Granicus GovDelivery Software even if the carry-forward figure for the Digital Strategy reserve from the previous item is not approved, pending consideration of the effects and risks for each.

75. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

None.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 12 noon)

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Chair