

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 10 JUNE 2021

PRESENT: County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)
County Councillors D Selby, G Jones, K W Curry, D O Evans, P C Pritchard, J Pugh, J Wilkinson, J Charlton, K Lewis, L V Corfield and D Jones-Poston

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillors I McIntosh (Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Planning and Housing), B Baynham (Portfolio Holder for Corporate Governance, Engagement and Regulatory Services), A Davies (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Transport), R Harries (Leader), H Hulme (Portfolio Holder for Environment), R Powell (Portfolio Holder for Young People and Culture)

Officers: Matt Perry (Head of Highways, Transport and Recycling), Nigel Brinn (Corporate Director - Economy and Environment), Diane Reynolds (Head of Digital Services), Jane Thomas (Head of Finance), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services) and Gareth Jones (Professional Lead – Regeneration)

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from County Councillor K Roberts-Jones.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED that County Councillor J Wilkinson be elected Vice-Chair for the ensuing year.

3. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest by Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting

4. DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS

The Committee did not receive any disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

5. COVID RECOVERY FUND PROPOSALS

Documents Considered:

- Draft report of the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Planning and Economic Regeneration.

Issues Discussed:

- The fund was established as a specific reserve to support the Council and community services recover from the impact of the pandemic over a two year period. £1.8m funding had been agreed by the Council in February 2021, supplemented by £100k per annum from the existing Community Grant Fund thus taking the total sum to £2m over two years. The programme has two key themes, namely community and economy and environment.

- Questions:

<p>How did the paper which went to Scrutiny in September regarding recovery planning help shape the proposals in the current report</p>	<p>There are a number of initiatives underway in response to recovery such as the Levelling Up Fund and the Powys Recovery Fund is one of a mixture of responses to recovery from Covid.</p>
<p>The fund is very welcome and there are two themes to the fund. It is £1m for both years. It is then split into £400k for community and £600k for the economy. In relation to the community element we would usually have £100k available for community groups to apply for. There is also an another £100k for toilets which will be allocated automatically. Therefore that leaves £200k for communities - why is this such a small proportion of the full fund.</p> <p>In relation to the economy there is £600k split down into various elements. Why is £340k being spent on potholes and highways as this does not fit comfortably into Covid recovery</p>	<p>It is a two year fund. Some of the funding could be brought forward as its a reserve and there is some flexibility, but the Council cannot bring forward next year's revenue funding.</p> <p>This is enhancing what is going into community groups. We are moving from a current £100k allocation to an allocation of £400k, earmarking £100k of that for public conveniences. It is a political decision how this fund is split, but officers are content with the proposal.</p> <p>This is not the only area being considered to support the highways network and it is a significant proportion of the fund for good reason as the Council has a deteriorating network.</p> <p>A significant bid for capital financing is being made to the Levelling Up Fund to support the highways network.</p> <p>£340k is a small amount in terms of the overall funding but improving network does improve the appearance of the network and assist productivity.</p> <p>In relation to the Levelling Up Fund the focus is on boosting the economy, tourism and the bid is around £5m for resurfacing and focussing on key elements of the network so that it boosts the economy, tourism, rights of way.</p>
<p>Having good roads does encourage tourism and cycling. The question is why a greater percentage of the covid recovery funds are being used for potholes and roads rather than</p>	<p>The link between Covid recovery and roads is that the Cabinet felt that part of the economy that had suffered the most were rural businesses and tourism. Many of these businesses</p>

<p>for actually people recovering from covid. There will be major issues around health and social care which are not covered from this fund. Understand this is a political decision but there will be financial, economic and personal issues for individuals in the next 12 to 24 months.</p>	<p>are on the minor road network. There are other pots of money towns can be drawn on but there is nothing for rural businesses and roads. Bids will also be made to the Levelling Up Fund.</p>
<p>Is the £340k for the Council's unclassified roads or all of the network.</p>	<p>Its for the whole network but most of the problems are on the smaller roads. The Cabinet wants other businesses to establish themselves in rural areas and there is an imbalance between the funding available for towns and not for elsewhere.</p>
<p>Understand the need for a quality road network for businesses, visitors and residents. How did the Cabinet arrive at this as a priority when it had stated earlier about a low carbon Powys as a priority. Is this a conflict with previous statements.</p>	<p>There are other sources of funding available. The Council hopes to make use of as many different sources of funding as possible to cover all of these areas of work.</p>
<p>Welcome the proposals. Have an interest in seeing more active travel schemes coming forward. What other funds can the Council obtain to develop those and develop new active travel routes outside towns. Paragraph 3.13 - financial recovery support. £40k is allocated for a dedicated support officer. Is there an overlap with the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) as they offer this support to residents currently and funding to offer this financial support. Paragraph 3.15 - 568 residents were supported last year. Can you expand on this - how were they supported, was it mainly due to 3 month Council tax holiday. Also is there more detail about the £500k income support officers bring in for customers each year.</p>	<p>The Council does have money advice officers who support residents. They do provide a different service to the CAB as they can tailor the advice specifically to the benefits that an individual can gain through the Council's systems but also a general discussion around Council Tax and point them to other benefits which are available. The money drawn in is not just access to the Council's money but also to other benefits. There is no duplication with other organisations such as CAB. The work of the money advice team is with those individuals who are known to the Council such as internal referrals. As there is such a demand for this support there is no duplication and more resource could be made available for this service. This level of detail can be included in the Cabinet report.</p>
<p>As many of the customers are internal referrals is there little</p>	<p>There is information on the Council website but people would have to</p>

<p>promotion of the money advice team outside of Powys</p>	<p>approach the Council. Perhaps this the advice which is available could be promoted more widely</p>
<p>Are we making sure this funding is not called pothole money but for resurfacing roads. With the community fund and the application process – it is of concern that applications need to be completed and submitted in 2 weeks' time. Is this too short a time period and could there be some slippage on the timescales as it's a very short time period for community groups to prepare applications.</p>	<p>We are supplementing existing sources of funding so the Council is used to bids coming in. It is helpful for applicants to have deadlines and timescales for the consideration of proposals. As the report and proposals are draft the timescales will be reviewed as there has been some slippage in the report being submitted to Cabinet which needs to be taken into account and first round will be extended. It is important to stress that people are waiting for this recovery fund and the Council wants to get the funds out as soon as possible so it's a fine balance on the timing. Road quality is the issue rather than potholes. The proposal is to utilise the funding for jet patching which is cost effective which is on top of a significant resurfacing programme. There are significant active travel funds which the Council is bidding for Council is bidding for and 3 schemes have been identified to include in the Levelling Up Fund proposal.</p>
<p>The Leader referenced that potholes were a barrier to rural businesses. What is the evidence base that the quality of rural roads is a barrier to rural businesses. Where is the evidence from the business sector. Have we underfunded the highways network.</p>	<p>Powys' road quality indicators are good on major roads in comparison with other authorities, but on rural network this is when these indicators deteriorate and sway the figures and makes Powys the worst in Wales because of the extensive Category C network that is in Powys. Many of the County's camp sites and visitor attractions are accessed by the rural network and they do not get the priority for funding.</p>
<p>Many elements of the plan are welcomed. Public conveniences – there are ongoing costs and the funding will be welcomed. The Council has a considerable network of public footpaths which are</p>	<p>Drainage and standing water is a problem and causes deterioration of the network. More maintenance work was undertaken last year and it has been effective. It is a programme of work which will continue to be implemented in future years.</p>

<p>being currently used at unprecedented levels. The Council must not forget this network and the necessary repairs and improvements needed. Anything we can do to fund countryside services would be welcomed.</p> <p>Highways – it is difficult to prioritise these works. The Council needs to look at potholes but also at the causes of potholes such as the lack of drainage and maintenance of the network. This needs to be addressed as well or money will be wasted.</p> <p>How does the Service prioritise this work.</p>	<p>Much of this is based on historic data from the highway network which includes the Highways Asset management Plan (HAMP) and critical gully areas. Revenue funding was increased last year to clear those critical areas but funding could be increased significantly to cover the need. The Levelling Up Funding could address a number of issues on the highways and footpath networks. There is a need for regular dialogue with Members as well to focus on priority areas.</p>
<p>Is there evidence about what has been taking place with drainage. This is a welcome fund. Can we have a list of what other things officers considered before they got to highways.</p>	<p>Highways was always on the list from the outset as was economic development and communities. The challenge was more around how the funds were allocated rather than what we took off the list. The money support service was an addition. What was considered on the list is detailed in the report.</p>
<p>£100k for bids. There is more than one bidding rounds, which will lead to more officer costs. Will officers costs reduce the funding available.</p>	<p>The Council would not want to see administrative costs diminishing funding, which is why a simple system has been devised for public conveniences.</p> <p>Teams will work with businesses and communities to identify how they can recover and how to access other funding as well as supporting them in accessing this funding. The Council will look at what funding is currently available and support them to access those funds as well as supporting them in accessing any future funding which becomes available.</p>
<p>Is there a list of funding sources which will become available. Should we not wait until we know what's available</p>	<p>UK Government have not released any detail on the Shared Prosperity Funding and it is not expected that this will be available until probably June or July.</p> <p>There is a vast array of funding support coming forward and the Council needs to make sure that it obtains its fair share of that funding.</p>

	<p>Some additional officer resource will be needed and it takes time to appoint these individuals so there is a need to get that support in place as soon as possible to help existing teams and to assist the Council draw down the available funding.</p>
<p>The Highways Service has been cut far too much for far too long. Will this additional funding support be targeted at individuals who could not get support previously.</p>	<p>This is a limited fund and focussed on community groups rather than individuals. This will not pick up the work of other services such as DWP. There are individuals and businesses who have fallen through the net and the Council continues to work with Welsh Government and Business Wales to try to influence and raise these issues. The package under consideration does provide an opportunity to help others but it does depend on individual circumstances.</p>
<p>This is about levering down funding for community groups. However, the amount available for the community covid recovery grant fund is really small. Is this about recycling money which is currently available.</p>	<p>This is still a larger amount of funding that the Council had at the beginning of the current financial year. The fund is about community groups bidding for funding.</p>
<p>Why is the funding for Highways split three ways between Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire and Brecknockshire when the greatest length of roads are in Montgomeryshire. Why is it split by a third each.</p>	<p>There is no allocation per Shire any longer. The allocation is determined by the Highways Asset Management Plan (HAMP) taking account of the major roads first. All Councils in Wales have their HAMP and allocation is by priority and criteria - assessed through a matrix.</p>
<p>This fund is almost an austerity recovery fund. Some of this funding is retrospective (highways) which is good. Community groups cannot ask for funding for retrospective projects but can bid for future projects. A number of issues discussed at the meeting are around retrospective problems but this option is not available for the community fund. Can this be reviewed to enable some groups to receive retrospective funding</p>	<p>The terminology is around expenditure – so the Council cannot fund expenses incurred in the previous year. The wording can be reviewed to clarify that it is expenses to be incurred, or has been lost but is not already funded from elsewhere.</p>
<p>For public conveniences community</p>	<p>This can be reviewed to see what</p>

<p>groups had to cover the costs to make them safe and cannot recover that cost even though it may have an impact on them in future. Can this be reviewed before it is considered by Cabinet.</p>	<p>can be supported within the remits of the grants.</p>
<p>In the application pack it states that faith based organisations cannot be funded. Some food banks and lunch clubs are faith based organisations and provide an important service, and undertake significant work in communities. Are we saying that a local food bank cannot apply</p>	<p>It was not the intention to say that. As we support food banks from elsewhere it would be contradictory to say this.</p>
<p>Public toilets - how was this apportionment determined as some organisations may run more than one facility so their costs may be higher.</p>	<p>Numerous options were considered to split the funding, but a simplified process was preferred where the £100k funding was split equally between 56 toilets.</p>
<p>There are 56 public conveniences in Powys - is this how this figure was identified.</p>	<p>Yes, this is based on the number of current organisations running toilets. An option was considered to give each organisation £1000 each and the remaining sun being available for bids. However, it was decided to have a simple process instead.</p>
<p>Some public conveniences obtain the Welsh Government trunk road funding. Is this ongoing</p>	<p>Yes, it is still ongoing.</p>
<p>Will those public conveniences who have received the £5k Welsh Government Grant be included or exempt from the Council's funding</p>	<p>They will be exempt, this is only for conveniences run by Town and Community Councils or voluntary groups.</p>
<p>Some of these conveniences are run by Community Councils and voluntary groups as well so not owned by the Trunk Road.</p>	<p>That funding would still come from Welsh Government.</p>
<p>Some Councils running trunk road toilets have not had confirmation as yet that the funding will be continuing. Is it going to be continued as if they are no longer to be funded from Welsh Government they would be eligible for the Council's funding.</p>	<p>The Welsh Government funding is the subject of a separate negotiation with Welsh Government, but it would be unfortunate if the funding ceased and these organisations were also unable to access the Council's funding. The Head of Highways, Transport and Recycling was asked to clarify whether the funding would remain for another year.</p>

Scrutiny made the following observations:

- The Committee welcomed:
 - the proposal for a Covid Recovery Fund
 - that the fund would be used to assist communities and businesses identify and draw down other funding from sources as they became available
- The Committee expressed concern:
 - regarding the proportion of the funding being spent on highways improvement, as this was not viewed by Members as a covid related matter
 - regarding the timescales for Phase 1 applications being submitted given the report being considered by the Cabinet had been delayed. Officers agreed to review the timescales for applications.
 - that some community organisations who had funded costs in the previous year would be barred from applying to the fund as it was considered to be retrospective funding. Officers clarified that the fund could not be used where funding had been obtained from elsewhere previously, but agreed to review the wording in the proposal.
 - that faith based organisations would not be eligible to apply for funding e.g. food banks as they undertook significant work in communities and received some funding currently by the Council. Officers agreed to review this section.
- The Committee questioned:
 - whether there was an overlap in the provision of service provided by the Council's Money Advice Service and the Citizen's Advice Bureau. Officers agreed to expand the detail in the report prior to consideration by the Cabinet.
 - why the Covid Recovery Fund had been identified to fund highways improvements rather than the Levelling Up Fund.
- The Committee asked:
 - that the service provided by the Council's Money Advice Service be promoted more widely than it is currently
 - for sight of the evidence from the business sector in Powys which led to the decision about the need to improve rural roads as they are a barrier to business.
 - that if possible and if additional funding from elsewhere could be identified that some be used to assist the repairs and maintenance of the public footpath network which was seeing unprecedented use during the pandemic.
 - that the Council clarifies whether the grant funding provided by Welsh Government to Town and Community Councils for public conveniences on trunk roads was likely to continue for the next financial year.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet

- 1 that the timescales for the receipt of Phase 1 applications be reviewed**
- 2 that the possibility of funding retrospective costs be considered**
- 3 that the in-eligibility of applications from faith based organisations be reviewed**
- 4 that scrutiny be provided with the evidence from the business sector on which the highways proposals were determined**

- 5 that clarification be sought from Welsh Government regarding the ongoing funding of public conveniences on the trunk road for 2021-22
- 6 that scrutiny receives a progress report on the delivery of the proposal in 6 months time

6.	SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME
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The Committee noted that future meetings would be held as follows:

12-07-21 10.00 - 12.00 Teams Live	Leadership and apprenticeship Crime and disorder report To be Confirmed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Q1 + Risk • Freedom Leisure • Q1 budget - efficiency savings
06-09-21 10.00 - 12.00 Teams Live	To be Confirmed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom Leisure
18-10-21 14.00 - 16.00 Teams Live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Q2 + Risk To be Confirmed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance Q2 + budget efficiency savings
29-11-21 10.00 - 12.00 Teams Live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime and Disorder / Community Safety Review / Community Safety Partnership

County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)