

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY ZOOM ON MONDAY, 27 JANUARY 2025**

**PRESENT**

County Councillor A Davies (Chair), B Davies, C Masefield, G Mitchell, J Yeomans,  
L Rijnenberg, P James, C Kenyon-Wade, R Devlin

**Portfolio Holders**

J Gibson-Watt Cabinet Member for and Open and Transparent Powys  
M Dorrance Cabinet Member for a More Prosperous Powys  
D Thomas Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Transformation  
R Church Cabinet Member for a Safer Powys  
J Berriman Cabinet Member for a Connected Powys  
D Selby Cabinet Member for a More Prosperous Powys  
J Charlton Cabinet Member for a Greener Powys

**Officers:**

Andy Thompson – Head of Housing  
Anne Phillips – Head of Finance  
Bets Ingram - Strategic Equalities and Risk Officer  
Catherine James – Head of Business Intelligence and Governance  
Clive Pinney Head of Legal and Monitoring Officer  
Diane Reynolds - Director of Economic Development and Growth  
Ellen Sullivan – Head of Digital Services  
Gemma Gabriel - Professional Lead Human Resources Management and  
Development  
Gwilym Davies – Head of Planning and Regulatory Services  
Jane Thomas - Director or Corporate Services  
Jenny Ashton – Senior Manager Community Wellbeing  
John Forsey - Head of Highways Transportation and Recycling  
Marie James – Account Manager  
Matt Perry – Chief Officer - Place  
Nina Davies – Director of Social Services and Wellbeing

<b>1.</b>	<b>APOLOGIES</b>
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Apologies received: G Breeze.

<b>2.</b>	<b>DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST</b>
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There were no disclosures of interest by Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting.

<b>3.</b>	<b>DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS</b>
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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.

<b>4.</b>	<b>DRAFT 2025-2026 BUDGET</b>
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**General**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- The budget was balanced between further efficiencies and protecting services residents depend upon.
- All services were doing as much as possible to make savings where possible.
- The Council were awaiting National Insurance settlement information from Welsh Government
- The Workforce and Development Plan demonstrated demands on staffing and related issues. Vacancy management provided an overview for wages and inflation assumptions to be forecast in the budget.
- Number of roles to be reduced was constantly evolving with limited agency staff usage.
- Second and empty homes in Powys could bring in an income, however significant challenges and notice had to be provided to change a premium and was suggested to evaluate impacts across Wales before a decision was made.

### **Highways, Transport and Recycling**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Page 153 ( appendix F) – Sustainable Powys public transport had Welsh Government funding set aside to enhance the service and to ensure communities were kept mobile.
- A staffing and back-office restructure would be undertaken to ensure consistency across the service area. Artificial Intelligence would be reviewed to determine how it could provide support to staff.
- Part of the transformation fund an additional role was added to help the Councils journey through net zero around electric vehicle education, infrastructure and on street parking.
- Certain grant funding was set aside for statutory services including 'Rights of Way' and investment would be made into bridges to avoid legal action.
- All possible avenues were explored to ensure school transport continued during road closures including trains. Work with Transport of Wales ensured limited closures.
- Waste Awareness Officers supported and guided residents with recycling and advising that recycling bins were to be put out for collection every week.
- Profit sharing agreement was an open book approach, If a contractor made a profit over and above the submitted price, it was shared 50/50 with the Council.
- Page 153 ( appendix F) – the adjusted base budget stayed in place for the service until it was suggested it was removed as a cost reduction.
- Longer term investment and adaptations to flooding were needed.
- More information was needed around the public transport budget element as it was unclear how it would be sustainable for the Council. Work was ongoing with Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and partners.
- Page 22 (item 3.77 table 5) – HTR had significant budget pressures and explained that all services had been tasked to keep services to a minimum to reduce costs. A wide variety of areas were being investigated including Trunk Road Agency efficiencies and a resource strategy for recycling currently out for engagement.

### **Planning, & Regulatory Services**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Neuadd Brycheiniog be considered for social housing due to homelessness pressures. A paper providing all options would be available later in the year.
- The Gwalia building had been sold without contents which had been reused, recycled and reduced and importantly stressed that it was not sold under pressure with a full asset review imminent.

- If Welsh Government planning fees rose too high would a decline in the number of applications received be a concern.
- There were a large range of fees in which some discretionary fees were not legally able to support a profit including Environment Health in which inspections cost the Council above average due to travel.
- More detail was explained that capital receipts figures differed due to a loss of a key sale and highlighted that interest payments to service borrowing were £37k daily and must be kept to a minimum, the Council look to use capital receipts effectively as possible and reduce the need to further borrow.

### **Housing Services**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Page 51 (Capital) – disabled adaptations a statutory duty for the Council helped to keep people living independently in which Powys had an aging population. The approval was subject to assessment/tests and may be subject to repayment.
- Homelessness was a whole Council concern and required early intervention in order to provide the best possible support and help. It was encouraged that advice was sought early to secure better outcomes.
- The Council had limited stock and aimed to provide a more permanent provision by asking partners to accept a larger number of temporary tenants to eliminate bed and breakfast provision, and to work towards everyone having a key to their own front door.
- Rental income from gypsy and traveller sites was actively being reviewed to invest back into sites.
- A number of schemes and loans were on offer interest free to landlords to maintain homes, once repaid the money would return to the pot for others to use.
- Empty properties were actively being sought with a dedicated website to report properties and officers on the ground. Frustrations were shared regarding the timescale setting up a programme and a detailed report would be forthcoming following the implementation of the strategy.

### **Economy and Climate Services**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- The Grant Funding Team had an important role to play to seek, sought and secure funding for the Council. Green financing including private sector investment housing and big fund providers looking to invest. The Marches Partnership was looking at innovative ways to fund capital and revenue costs of the Council.
- A commitment be made that the Shared Prosperity Fund allocation, vital to working in partnership with the third sector remained. The Portfolio Holder was committed and proud of the work conducted with the third sector and a community fund had been set up with PAVO (Powys Association Volunteering Organisation).
- Funding was available for 35 staffing roles; however, some schemes and projects had concluded, and temporary contracts had ended, however a restructure would take place and roles at risk would be placed on the redeployment register.

### **Community Wellbeing**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Libraries received a core budget and sought grant funding from alternative sources including Shared Prosperity Funding to support roles and deliver schemes.
- A review on assets and services in each town to meet the priorities of the community would be conducted to explore all options of co-location.

- Libraries were a key hub for members of the public to use if digital availability was limited, putting considerable pressure on library staff in which the pay adjustment was welcomed.
- Participation and attendance figures for libraries was dependent on a wide variety of variables including, location, space, hours etc.
- Digital development was ongoing with increased uptake including an iPad and sim card loan schemes.
- The upcoming customer experience framework would ensure that the Council offered all options to residents.
- Solar panel investment would continue as it had shown a reduction in gas and electricity consumption in leisure centres and Powys buildings with some savings and helping towards the effects of global warming.

### **Corporate Services**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Conversations be pursued between the Council and relevant bodies to discuss and call for options that may lead to the Fire Authorities budget requests being met directly through their own mechanism for council tax precept levies, as was the case for the Police and Town and Community Councils. A clear narrative be provided for council tax bill payers showing the element that relates to the Fire authority.
- Two major concerns around the cost analysis were shared to be population and secondary schools numbers which did not favour rural authorities in which had been expressed in communications to the Welsh Government and Welsh Local Government Association.
- It was important to sign post and support residents who may have personal financial concerns, and the Council Money Advise Team could help identify benefits that they could draw down.
- An advertising campaign be considered to ensure residents knew the full range of money advice and support services the Council offered.

### **Legal Services**

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Base funding was in place to increase service capacity to improve responsiveness and efficiency in order to support all services of the Council.

<b>5. REPORTS</b>
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See above.

<b>6. IMPACT ASSESSMENT</b>
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See above.

<b>7. SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>
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Increases for public transport and in particular bus services, following concerns were highlighted:

- Future risks around grant funding and how long contracts may have to be set for.
- Rural transport would be key in realising many of the aims of 'Sustainable Powys'.
- Train travel was a viable option for in-county travel and should not be ignored in future appraisals.

- The proposed budget increase was significant, and the committee would welcome more information on what the outputs from such a rise in costs would be.

<b>Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet</b>	<b>Accept</b> (plus, Action & timescale)	<b>Partially Accept</b> (plus, Rationale, Action & timescale)	<b>Reject</b> (plus, Rationale)
1. High-level conversations were requested to be pursued with relevant bodies to discuss and call for options that may lead to the Fire Authorities budget requests being met directly through their own mechanism for council tax precept levies, as was the case for the Police and Town and Community Councils. A clear narrative for those with council tax bills how their bill is made up clearly showing the element that relates to the Fire authority.			
2. Support was given to increase public transport; however, the committee were unable to agree the budget line as more information was required about the source of the funding.			
3. An advertising campaign be considered to ensure residents are fully aware of all council services offered (especially the financial support team).			
4. Review be conducted on the co-location of services to identify additional savings.			
5. For a report on all asset sales/ disposals and Community Asset Transfers to be provided to ERC for scrutiny.			
6. Review on empty and second homes to be conducted and to evaluate impacts across Wales to determine if the council could increase income.			
7. Reinforce that the shared prosperity fund is vital to be received by third parties.			

**County Councillor A Davies (Chair)**