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Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee Monday, 30 January 2023

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY ZOOM ON MONDAY, 30 JANUARY 2023

PRESENT

County Councillor A Davies (Chair)

County Councillors D Bebb, A Cartwright, B Davies, I Harrison, A Jones, E A Jones,
K Lewis, G Mitchell, C Walsh and S L Williams

County Councillor A Davies

Portfolio Holders

County Councillors D Selby, D Thomas, J Charlton, J Berriman, M Dorrance,
R Church

Officers

Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services)

Gwilym Davies (Head of Property, Planning and Public Protection)

Matthew Perry (Head of Highways, Transport and Recycling)

Jane Thomas (Head of Finance)

Emma Palmer (Head of Transformation and Communications)

Catherine James (Deputy Head of Transformation and Communications)

Marie James (Finance Officer)

Jenny Ashton (Interim Head of Community Services)

Diane Reynolds (Head of Economy and Digital Services)

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| 1. APOLOGIES |
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors T Colbert and
S C Davies

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| 2. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST |
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There were no declarations of interest from Members relating to items for
consideration on the agenda.

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| 3. DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP |
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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.

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| 4. DRAFT 2023 - 2024 BUDGET |
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Documents Considered:

Draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023-2028, Draft 2023-24 Budget, and
Capital Programme for 2023-2028 presented by
County Councillor David Thomas Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate
Transformation.

Property, Planning and Public Protection

Issues Discussed:

- Presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Targeting budgets with a focus on service redesign, staffing budget reductions and encouraging energy management.

Questions:

| Question | Response |
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| <p>Would the proposed reduction of the Environmental Health Officer role mean the council would fail statutory requirements.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The risk would be managed to ensure compliance with the code of practice; however, it would be unlikely that the high-risk properties are visited less frequently. It was stressed that at full capacity the team struggle to meet the code of practice.</p> |
| <p>Has the consultation for the Landfill Officer role been concluded.</p> | <p>Officer Comments: The team had been redesigned to keep expertise within the Council, which concluded to a loss of one full time equivalent staff member.</p> |
| <p>With regards to staff retention across Building Control, would existing officers currently struggling with workloads be able to carry out duties sufficiently.</p> | <p>Officer comment: Workloads were high and risks would have to be balanced against all other proposals for consideration.</p> <p>Portfolio Holder Comments: Roles within Building Control are split, which the council must provide a competitive service with external providers. The Environmental Health Commercial division would lose one full time equivalent, however, if recruitment was successful a better-quality service could be offered. Cuts were conducted in a professional manner and by keeping the remaining staff, the team were able to continue to provide services.</p> |
| <p>What would be the projected income from the Park Offices, on the rental market as Ladywell House was still awaiting a tenant.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The largest factor would be to remove the running of the building. Securing a tenant would provide an income of approximately £65k. Negotiations were ongoing with several parties.</p> |
| <p>What was the Risk Assessment report writing process.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The report writing process was robust, involving several senior staff members.</p> |
| <p>What was the new reduced temperature</p> | <p>Officer Comment:</p> |

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| <p>for Council buildings.</p> | <p>It was proposed to drop from 21 to 19 degrees. Further energy efficiencies would be taken by replacing lighting with a more cost-effective LED provision.</p> |
| <p>How would the building maintenance be reduced and monitored and how much would it cost to rectify issues due to lack of maintenance.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Council buildings have been kept to a good standard and considered adequate for the next couple of years.</p> <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: It was an area that would be monitored to ensure stock does not deteriorate. Rationalisation of assets for opportunities and community benefits would be completed as an annual review.</p> |
| <p>Would Park Offices be considered for sale for housing development.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: A better return would be gained through rental opportunities, also providing more options for North Powys Wellbeing hub.</p> |
| <p>Was the biomass boiler fixed at County Hall, relating to the temperature decrease in office buildings.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Remaining issues were being investigated.</p> |
| <p>How competitive would the Building Control service be with reduced staffing levels and increased charges; would it lead to longer delays.</p> | <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: It was explained that Planning and Building Control are separate services. Planning enforcement delays were being closely monitored. Building Control response times are very close to target. The services were under a government reshaping exercise with continued learning opportunities to offer a high level of service. The Lead Officer has provided assurance that the service can be competitive with market facing work, and timings would be monitored due to capacity.</p> |
| <p>Why were burial fees increased as Powys is the fourth highest charger.</p> | <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: The increase was the first since 2019. Previous year analysis was undertaken to determine the impact from previous increases made.</p> |

The Committee welcomed:

- The assurance that the savings proposals provided the way forward for the Service's development in the future.
- The Council moving to greener working environments including LED lighting.

- Assurance that the Building Control response times are achieving targets.
- The Planning and Building Control services are in support of the government reshaping scheme, which includes continued learning and development to offer a high level of service.

The Committee noted that:

- The Impact Assessment process was robust.
- Building stock will be monitored closely to ensure building standards do not fall. Assets will be rationalised to seek opportunities for disposal and reduce maintenance costs.
- Burial fees have increased for the first time since 2019.
- Building Control response times are improving.
- The office temperature decreases from 21 to 19 degrees.

The Committee requested:

- Evidence in respect of the Park Offices and whether the Council had undertaken market testing regarding the ability to sell or rent the building.

The Committee remained unconvinced about:

- The delivery of statutory services due to the risks to the Council by reducing staffing levels.

The Committee expressed concern regarding:

- The risks to the Council by removing posts and the impact on statutory service delivery.
- The ability of the Council to let the Park Office, particularly as there are vacant spaces currently in Ladywell House.
- Reduced levels of budget for building maintenance which could lead
- to additional rectification costs.
- Delays in the planning process and enforcement, although numbers are improving.
- Building Control structure, fees have increased, timescales remain a concern due to capacity.
- Burial fees for Powys are the fourth most expensive in Wales.

Highways, Transport and Recycling

Issues Discussed:

- Presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Focus on high inflation affecting many areas within the service, transport route optimisation and the Bulking facility permit for Abermule.

Questions:

| Question | Response |
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| Was there an option to change the current street lighting energy supply to solar battery or any disconnection from | Officer Comment: All options were being investigated. |

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| the grid. | |
| Why was there a delay to the £1m fleet replacement budget and what costs would be involved to keep vehicles for additional twelve months as more maintenance would be required. | Officer Comment: It was an element of risk that the Council had considered. All vehicles would be transferred to electric when a replacement was needed, however costs can be on hundred percent more for a new electric vehicle compared to a typical fuelled vehicle. |
| What was the position of the waste bulking facility in Abermule. | Officer Comment: Both Newtown and Welshpool staff plus the fleet were based at Abermule. The Council are not yet permitted to drop off waste at the site and awaiting a Natural Resources Wales permit. |
| Had the odour problems at the Abermule bulking facility been resolved. | Officer Comment: Work with consultants was concluded and being reviewed by Natural Resources Wales. |
| Due to Inflationary pressures on materials (tarmac increase of 40%) would the same amount of work be carried out | Officer Comment: Powys County Council had the largest network of roads in Wales, with additional roads adopted due to by-pass areas. Due to recent flooding and cold spells demand had increased. |
| What were the school transport budget changes and timelines for the coming year. | Officer Comment: Apologies were given around the lack of communication around the recent changes. A lessons learned exercise had taken place, with a focus on how communications could improve. A review of routes, and capacity (using the QR code system) led to a potential fifteen buses being stopped. All routes were risk assessed to ensure safe capacity with no spare seating. |
| Would problems arise next year by taking money out of savings for the bus emergency scheme and the vehicle replacement fund this year. | Officer Comment: Assurance was provided, due to the service not wishing to rush decisions, other areas would be reviewed to achieve increased savings targets of £1.5m for next year. |
| As the Abermule bulking facility is not able to process waste where is it taken. | Officer Comment: The waste is taken to Welshpool to be bulked. The bulking permit relates to recycling only. |

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| <p>The network of public rights of way showed that bridges will need some maintenance, where do they feature in budget.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Countryside services and Rights of Way budget will remain the same due to previous reductions. Internal and external funding was accessed for most projects including the shared prosperity fund.</p> |
| <p>Could the Welsh Government funding be channelled into the maintenance for existing footpaths and not on the opening of new footpaths.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Footpaths have a priority ranking; the Head of the Service will take action to explore all options with members to ensure everything was being done to achieve the best for the Powys citizens.</p> |

The Committee welcomed:

- A very thorough set of papers provided.
- The confidence from the Head of Service that the Abermule site will be fully operational by April, just awaiting the permit from Natural Resources Wales.
- The apology from the Head of Service for the recent issues in relation to School Transport. A lessons learned exercise had taken place, with a focus on how communications could improve.
- That there were no cuts for the Rights of Way and Countryside services who provide a statutory role for the Council, with the re-engagement of volunteer support after the covid pandemic.

The Committee noted that:

- An assurance was provided that all options for street lighting are being explored to allow disconnection from the grid and use greener energy sources of with possible savings.
- A review of all bus routes has taken place with the addition of the QR code survey results showing capacity numbers, which indicated that a possible fifteen buses could be removed from service.

The Committee requested that:

- Communications are improved, including around the running of the school transport service.

The Committee remained unconvinced about:

- The strategy for certain budget lines to be removed this year and put back in future year for both the bus emergency scheme and the vehicle depreciation fund.

The Committee expressed concern regarding the:

- Risk element around fleet development and keeping vehicles for longer, with the delay of adding £1m into the replacement budget. Possible additional costs could be incurred.
- Inflationary increase pressures on materials which may lead to a slight decrease in the amount of work carried out. Recent weather conditions have created additional pressures to the network and service.

- Shared Prosperity Fund being only used within the Council, and the opportunities for community groups to access this funding.

Economy and Digital Services

Issues Discussed:

- Presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Targeting budgets around the reduction and recommission of current contracts.

Questions:

| Question | Response |
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| Regarding the £21k saving on Careline, would the Council move to LoRaWAN wearables. Officer Comment as below - LoRaWAN is a wide area network that can send signals up to five miles, no need WI-FI or mobile phone connectivity. | Officer Comment: A blend of options and technologies were being explored to update the pull cords or pendants residents currently have, technologies are not yet proven and still being tested. |
| If LoRaWAN is opted for, would dedicated officers receive training to operate the back office. | Officer Comment: The Council would look to fully automate the back-office element with a proactive push of information as alerts, without the manual intervention of officers. |
| Would the Council create a back office internally. | Officer Comment: Trials were being undertaken on various technologies; however, the build may be completed internally which was being costed. |
| Have affected residents been communicated with regarding costs and what was involved. | Officer Comment: Communication is key, the Council stepped in to pause BT progress from copper to digital lines until their communications were improved due to the vulnerability of residents using the system. |
| what could be done for those residents without WI-FI or mobile phone signal. | Officer Comment: LoRaWAN is a wide area network that can send signals up to five miles, it does not need WI-FI or mobile phone connectivity. |

The Committee welcomed:

- Developments towards the replacement of the Careline (personal pendant or pull cord alarms) provision, which includes the automated in-house back office processes.

The Committee noted that:

- The Council have been working closely with BT to ensure improved communication with those residents affected.
- Work is being conducted to reduce the number of cyber and ICT contracts whilst ensuring the estate remains secure.

Workforce and Organisation Development

General:

- A verbal presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Reports noted.

The Committee welcomed:

- The DBS service will be closely monitored, and changes will be made if there is a negative impact following the fee increase to external bodies to ensure the service remains competitive and cost neutral.

The Committee noted:

- Increase in charges for the provision of DBS checks for external customers.
- Growth pressures in the Organisational Team, due to significant cuts previously it was felt that investment is needed.

Transformation and Democratic Services

General:

- A verbal presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Reports noted.

The Committee noted:

- Reduction in APSE fees.
- Reduction in general office expenses.
- No impact on staff or members of the public.
- Democratic services are funded from the base budget; however, some of the Transformation and Communications areas are funded by income generation.

Community Services

Issues Discussed:

- Presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- With focus on Service redesign and school meal price increase.

Questions:

| Question | Response |
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| Could it be confirmed that Freedom Leisure will not be closing centres within Powys. | Officer Comment: The Head of Service had not received any suggestion of closures. |
| Confirmation requested that the y Gaer | Officer Comment: |

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| <p>Savings (£35k) would be generated by Neath Port Talbot College occupying the two main rooms and café.</p> | <p>Correct.</p> |
| <p>Update requested on the Impact Assessment for the Sport Development staff consultation.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The process had been concluded.</p> |
| <p>Which area would the funding be obtained from for the upgrade of school kitchens</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Funding was linked to the Welsh Government Universal roll out of free school meals.</p> |
| <p>Does the Welsh Government reimburse the Council for free school meals.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The Welsh Government pay £2.90 for a school meal Primary school meal current price £2.35 Secondary school meal current price £2.45 10pence increase would help towards income, service costs and improvements.</p> |
| <p>Do the Welsh Government pay for actual meals provided or for all those eligible.</p> <p>Could the Welsh Government Universal free school meal timetable be speeded up, as there were only currently two-year groups receiving meals.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Clarity was provided; that were two aspects: the new universal infant provision of free school meals is different to the older scheme which funding has been provided as an allocation in the settlement for several years.</p> <p>The Council was not able to speed up the Welsh Government planned rollout timetable as it is based on the kitchen improvements, structure within the service and staffing levels.</p> <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: The 10pence increase would only affect those pupils' purchasing meals in schools with a 70% take up of free school meals out of those eligible.</p> <p>Only 56% of children were taking up the option of a hot meal, and the service were looking at ways to increase the uptake of paid meals.</p> |
| <p>Would the reduction of the Arts Officer mean that the Council would no longer have an Arts Service.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The Arts Officer works with organisations which deliver the activities. The service did not have an Arts Strategy which will be developed using funding from the Shared Prosperity Fund. This would assist and encourage external art organisations to be more sustainable.</p> |

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| <p>The arts and media industry play an important role in helping manage mental health, concerns were raised that cuts in this area would leave Powys youngsters /residents disadvantaged (to entering this industry).</p> | <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: The process of funding had not changed for several years, and a new way forward was needed to support organisations in order that all grant funding opportunities are achieved. The role and duties of the Arts Officer will be absorbed into the service.</p> |
| <p>Does the Council support Freedom Leisure in other ways, as there was the financial challenge to find over £1m in the next year on top of the £287k this quarter.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: The Council support Freedom Leisure with an annual management fee from both the Leisure and School services (£2.3m) which reduces year on year. Welsh Government also provide support through funding and grants.</p> |

The Committee welcomed:

- Welsh Government will be providing financial support to ensure school kitchens are fully equipped and upgraded to provide school meals including the new universal free school meal scheme.
- Freedom Leisure have indicated to the Council that centres will not close.
- That the Neath Port Talbot College Group will occupy the café and two main rooms within y Gaer to generate Council income.

The Committee noted:

- A full review of the Leisure Service will be undertaken, co-production models could be adopted.
- The Council support Freedom Leisure with an annual management fee from both the Leisure and School services (£2.3m).
- The Sport Development staff consultation process has been concluded.
- The 10 pence increase for school meals will only apply to those pupils that purchase meals.
- Clarity was provided; new universal infant provision of free school meals is different to the older scheme which has been provided as an allocation in the settlement for several years.
- Only 56% of children are taking up the option of a hot meal, and the service are looking at ways to increase the uptake of paid meals.
- The Arts Service has been funded the same way for several years and a new way forward is required.

The Committee requested:

- Whether the Library Service would consider book donations.

The Committee remained unconvinced about:

- The removal of the Arts Officer within the Council.

The Committee expressed concern regarding:

- The Council is not able to speed up the Welsh Government timetable for the universal infant free school meal provision for all primary schools. (Two year groups currently in receipt).

- The service does not have a current Arts Strategy which will be developed using funding from the Shared Prosperity Fund. This would assist and encourage external art organisations to be sustainable.
- The Cultural Services absorbing work currently conducted by the Arts Officer.

Housing Services

Issues Discussed:

- A verbal presentation to the Committee by the Head of Service to provide an overarching view of the Housing Service.

Questions:

| Question | Response |
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| What is modular interim accommodation. | Officer Comment: Self-contained temporary units that can be used whilst looking for permanent housing and can be moved from site to site within Powys. |
| Due to the shortage of single bedroom accommodation, how does the Council decide what accommodation is appropriate. | Officer Comment: It was explained that people on low or middle income may rely on universal credit. Affordability checks are conducted by the Council before accommodation is allocated. The council tax spare bedroom tax is hindering the process of allocating accommodation as Universal Credit could be deducted by 25%. Only 6% of properties in Powys are one-bedroom properties. |
| What is the forecast allocation for the council to build homes. | Officer Comment: Final details would be released in the Housing Revenue Account Business plan. |
| It was felt that the triage provision should be more than just housing, and it was asked what partnership and collaboration arrangements would be in place. | Officer Comment: The proposal was developed with Social Services to provide 24/7 temporary accommodation along with additional support when needed. Assessments would determine what additional support if any, were needed for the longer term. |
| Was there enough council housing stock for residents to downsize. | Portfolio Holder Comment: It was recognised that housing needs change for residents and development is ongoing for extra care schemes, which can free up stock for re-allocation. Due to different needs the way we build with partners would have to change. |

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| | <p>The bedroom tax had put additional pressures on tenants and support is being provided. It was noted that the tax does not apply to pensioners.</p> |
| <p>Emphasis on any new housing site is affordable homes, but the demand in Powys is from those that just need a home.</p> | <p>Officer Comment: Many people who cannot afford to purchase a home opt to go on the housing register.</p> <p>Portfolio Holder Comment: The capital strategy showed that resource has been aligned to deliver more homes by building new, rejuvenating empty homes or bringing more into the housing stock.</p> |

The Committee welcomed:

- The new project to develop a 24/7 triage provision of self-contained accommodation. The Housing Service is working with Social Services to develop plans.
- The new initiative would utilise self-contained temporary units with the potential to move within the County.

The Committee noted that:

- Cabinet have recognised homelessness levels have doubled but budget levels have not increased, with the service being asked to provide more with the same resource.
- No cuts or savings have been proposed.
- The Housing Revenue Account is funded by rent from tenants and can only be used towards services for council tenants or services that are a benefit to them.
- The Housing General fund is a mix of funding from the Council, Welsh Government, and other grant funding which provides all non-landlord related services.
- The detailed allocation of the budget for council builds will be available in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan which is subject to separate report to Cabinet.
- Housing needs to provide a range of properties to accommodate those wishing to both upsize and downsize, taking into consideration to the current cost of living crisis.

The Committee expressed concern regarding:

- The lack of small one bedroom accommodation units for the citizens of Powys. Only 6% currently.
- The council tax spare bedroom tax is hindering the process of allocating accommodation. Universal Credit could be deducted by 25%. Affordability checks are carried out by the Council before accommodation is allocated.

**Finance
General:**

- A verbal presentation to the Committee by the Section 151 Officer outlining the saving proposals and pressures within the service.
- Reports noted.

Legal

General:

- Reports noted.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet:

1. That all options be explored regarding the Park Offices Newtown including its sale.
2. That the Shared Prosperity fund is not limited to use by the Council and opportunities be provided to community groups to access this funding.
3. Communications and engagement are improved with citizens of Powys.
4. That in respect of Property, Planning and Public Protection mitigation is in place to ensure Statutory requirements are delivered after service re-modelling.

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| 5. | REPORTS |
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Please see Item 4

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| 6. | IMPACT ASSESSMENTS |
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Please see Item 4

6.1. Timetable

County Councillor A Davies (Chair)

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