



Health and Care Scrutiny Committee – 26-01-2024
Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee – 30-01-2024
Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee – 30-01-2024
Finance Panel – 31-01-2024

Scrutiny Observations to Cabinet on: 06-02-2024

Health and Care, Learning and Skills, The Economy, Residents and Communities, Scrutiny Committees and the Finance Panel met between 26-01-2023 and 31-01-24 and considered the following documents:

- Draft 2024 – 2025 Budget

The Scrutiny Committees and the Finance Panel thank the Portfolio Holders and officers for attending scrutiny.

Health and Care Scrutiny Committee

General:

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Members felt that the Impact Assessments could have contained more in-depth information for fuller understanding and allow more constructive challenge.
- Impact Assessments should have provided more information including:
 - a. A brief description around pressures or reductions.
 - b. How clients could be impacted if budget reductions and pressures were implemented. Even if there was no impact, it should be made clear.
 - c. Any risks associated with cost reductions and growth pressures.

- Cost reductions which have continued from past years should be re-visited and updated on impact assessments and included within public budget papers.
- Further information was requested regarding how many of the Powys County Council Grow Our Own newly qualified Social Workers would be retained within year.
- The Section 151 Officer provided assurance to the Committee that the appropriate level of risk had been carefully considered to form the calculated assessment after concerns were raised regarding the level of risk not being clear from the list of cost reductions or growth pressures.

Children's Services

The Committee noted, observed, requested that:

- Clarification was received in respect to the cost per child for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) placements, over and above the funding provided by the Home Office and how the impact on Powys' budget compared with other councils.
- It was agreed that UASC placements would be a future item for scrutiny and would be added to the upcoming agenda.
- Greater clarity was received around the Assured Savings figure of £955,850 and how further savings identified in Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 in 2023-2024 affected this and any other associated figures in the budget proposals.
- Officers replied to a query around why Early Help was presented as a pressure and whether there was an associated cost reduction. It was explained due to the increased demand post-pandemic, the team would be restructured.
- Clarity and further details were requested regarding the £200,000 pressure around the need to increase staffing in Residential settings.
- Work was ongoing for projections for 2025-2026 in respect of savings available from budget areas such as; Placements, 16+ Accommodation, and the reduction in Agency staff etc., which would be made available to the Committee.
- Officers provided clarification on the utilisation of the COVID workforce grant and explained the significant impacts if the grant were to reduce or cease.
- Better quality information was requested around the short breaks impact assessment, and for clarity and evidence to be provided around the "creative approach".

The Committee were concerned that:

- The budget did not reflect the additional pressures regarding the UASC placements for the near future (2024-2025 and in the four following years).
- Significant impacts for the service had been identified regarding Placement cost reductions which would commence in April 2025, which may present a potential risk to the Council's financial plan.

Adults Services/Commissioning and Partnerships:

The Committee noted, observed, requested that:

- Officers would provide a single document to demonstrate budget savings and pressures from 16-years and under, through to Post-16 into Adults Services for a 5-year period commencing April 2024.
- Reassurance was received that the Council were paying the Real Living Wage to support workers in the care sector.
- An answer was provided regarding the calculation of the cost reduction associated with day opportunities/day centres. However additional details of the calculations would be provided to the Committee.
- Officers and the Portfolio Holder commented that a robust engagement exercise was underway to explore options for older persons day opportunities including online surveys and face-to-face meetings to determine what was important for now and future needs.
- The Service was committed to working with different partners to determine and implement the most suitable model within the residential care sector, with considerations around complex seasonal changes and increased demands. The Committee highlighted the risk associated with the Powys provider market not being able to meet some clients' needs.
- An impact assessment was requested in relation to the cost reduction associated with reducing voids in learning disability respite. It was confirmed that capacity would not be affected.
- A key focus was to expand the Shared Lives offer to provide continued support and stability which enabled independence and community inclusivity, with emphasis on less costly packages of care and out-of-county options being needed.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet	Accept (plus Action & timescale)	Partially Accept (plus Rationale, Action & timescale)	Reject (plus Rationale)
1. Monitor the risk associated with grant funded fixed-term posts.		Service will continue to monitor risk associated with grant funded fixed-term posts through existing processes.	
2. Revisit impact assessments, to reflect and include updated previous years and provide an impact assessment for each cost reduction.			Service has followed agreed approach to completion of impact assessments. Scrutiny welcome to request additional information with regards to

			any individual proposal. Impact Assessments are forward looking, and it would not be appropriate to include previous years.
--	--	--	---

Membership of the Health and Care Scrutiny Committee:

County Councillors: A Jenner (Chair), G.E. Jones, C Robinson, C Walsh, H Hulme.

Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee

General

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- The impact assessments provided were not satisfactory, with little detail to enable the Committee to give constructive challenge, particularly around the Schools Delegated Budget.

Leisure and Education

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- There was an apparent lack of equity in Leisure facilities for pupils across the County, and the ability for learners to be transported easily, Officers agreed that transport requirements needed to be better understood.
- The impact on learners on the potential reduction in leisure services would not be known for some time.
- The savings of the Leisure services budget reductions were interlinked with the Sustainable Powys programme and elements once defined would be brought to the relevant Scrutiny Committee, therefore the Committee felt the service lacked a distinct vision.
- Schools close to the border may lose learners from Powys Leisure facilities to Shropshire or Herefordshire without appropriate transportation provision.
- As Freedom Leisure had not yet signed the adjustment to the contract agreement, concerns were raised by the Committee of what assurances could be given that the cost reductions would be realised.
- The Impact Assessment was disappointing as it did not refer to the Education Minister's focus on aspirations for all.
- Concerns were raised that there was no acknowledgement of multi-able and talented learners within the Delegated Budget.

Welsh Medium Education

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Further information be provided on the funding of TROCHI immersion across Powys, the current £100k covers little more than the staffing resources.
Budget drives results and outcomes, without financial support, schools are powerless to provide learners the opportunity to be taught in the language of their choice.
- The Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee would form a TROCHI working group to review the existing provision, development, and map progress.

PRU (Pupil Referral Unit)

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- It was important to establish the changes of the ALNET (Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal) Act and measure the impact on both schools and learners to feed into a remodelling of the PRUs.
- Information was provided by Officers on the timescales, capacity, occupation, and transportation.
- Concerns were raised that schools would not have sufficient budget nor skills to deal with pupils remaining within their home school rather than receive provision through a PRU.
- A clear risk in relation to the cost reduction and whether it would be delivered within the fiscal year, given that remodelling would be undertaken.

Schools Delegated Budget

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Officers gave the latest cumulative position of £500k in Quarter 3 with a projected cumulative position for 2025-26 of £1m.
- Schools In depth reviews had been positive in sourcing savings, with further reviews scheduled after the February half term and the schools funding formula had been processed.
- The 4.2% increase in the delegated funding, which was welcomed, it was noted the figure was less than other service areas.
- They be informed of the date and amount of the Welsh Government grant funding for Foundation Phase and 16+ provision award.
- Assurance sought that as a result of the £2.5m shortfall, schools would not see a worsening position over the financial year.
- Assurance from the Cabinet that an update is provided to the Committee on the management of the school maintenance backlog.
- Explanation given on the Transformation programme capital monies which stood at £46m 2023-24 and at £12m 2024-25.

- The Capital programme Strategic Outline Case to be presented to Welsh Government in March would outline projects to be afforded within the 9-year rolling programme, and what approach would be appropriate in each case i.e., remodelling, new build, design and build or off-site construction. Assurance given by Officers that the Transformation programme had not slowed.
- There was a concern due to the proposed budget shortfall of £2.5m would result in staffing reductions which would impact on curriculum delivery, producing poor learner outcomes.
- To provide the Committee with further information on the schools' delegated budget, which was proposed to have a shortfall of £2.5m, leaving schools with desperate decisions to make, undoubtedly through staff reductions, due to the lack of reserves.

Scrutiny's Recommendation to Cabinet	Accept (plus Action & timescale)	Partially Accept (plus Rationale, Action & timescale)	Reject (plus Rationale)
<p>1. To review the impact on the reduction of the Leisure Services Budget and the impact this would have on vacant slots, learners, and schools, including the offer of wet-side activities and transport requirements.</p>		<p>A more complete Impact Assessment will be completed in collaboration with schools, freedom leisure and transport for the second year savings. This work is already underway and will be completed by 1st April. Assurance is given that curriculum requirements will be maintained when considering the implementation of any change.</p>	
<p>2. Assurances sought from Cabinet that the Welsh language crisis within schools would be addressed urgently. The Impact Assessments provided stated there was no impact on the Welsh language, which was untrue.</p>			<p>We don't accept that there is a Welsh Language Crisis in Powys schools. During the last two years Estyn inspections in our Welsh medium settings and primary schools have been positive. There are no Welsh medium provisions in any form of Estyn follow up in this sector. We have enhanced Welsh medium provision in</p>

			primary schools with the implementation of a Welsh medium stream in Ysgol y Cribarth and looking to develop secondary provision in line with the WESP over the course of the coming year.
3. To re-consider the impact the reduction in PRU (Pupil Referral Units) would have on school budgets and staff well-being, with learners remaining at their home school. And reflect on vulnerable learners having to travel long distances.		The re-alignment of the pupil referral service is focussed on continuing to deliver a high-quality service in a different way – that is aligned with the central tenets of a ‘Sustainable Powys’ and the wider schools transformation programme. To support the evolving needs of children and young people in Powys, the service needs to be increasingly agile, flexible and cohesive across the County. Realised saving would be as a result of consolidating the service onto one site and may include potential savings related to utilities, travel costs (staff travel to learners), satellite provision and outreach support. In addition, the service is undertaking a thorough evaluation and review of the previous SEN/ALN Strategy, that is fit for purpose for learners in a world following a global pandemic and cost of living crisis. There have been no decisions about location of a site, and the full business case is being written that will include specific figures which will include the travel arrangements.	

Membership of the Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee:

County Councillors: R G Thomas (Chair), A W Davies, D Bebb, D Meredith, S McNicholas, G Preston, B Davies, C Robinson

Co-Opted Members: K Chedgzoy, M Evitts, S Davies.

Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee

General

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- In-depth paperwork was provided which in turn demanded significant deliberation. However, impact assessments could have been more detailed.
- It was useful that future ideas were presented within proposals for challenge, and concerns to be raised in advance of any decision making.

Finance Services

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Congratulations were shared that a positive start had been made to enable savings to be made whilst providing a fully committed service. Confirmation was provided that the service was comfortable with the reductions shown.
- It was asked how the capital receipt would be found and if County Farms would be considered for disposal, it was explained that the capital receipt target was based on proposed work around Sustainable Powys and the disposal of assets to help capital investment and keep borrowing within sustainable prudent limits.

Legal Services

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- A budget allocation was not provided to the Registration Service and provided by charging a fee, which was almost a full cost recovery.
- Confirmation provided that a contribution towards the increased costs of Coroners was anticipated.

Community Development

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- The Arts Service would be looking at other opportunities of funding to boost the small core budget and would explore how to make the service more sustainable.
- The leisure contract energy saving projects would contribute towards future savings in line with Sustainable Powys and placed-based planning.
- It was explained that the Leisure Review was part of Sustainable Powys and would not be part of budget setting.
- Leisure centres would be sustainable for the financial year, joint working between services was ongoing to explore all options and opportunities.
- Concerns were raised around the size of the maintenance backlog programme of works for leisure centres and how it may increase. It was explained that it was jointly managed between Powys County Council and Freedom Leisure and officers felt that it was manageable.
- Library Services would be supported by additional grant funding for the next couple of years and the core budget would be reduced, the delivery of the service would not be impacted.

Workforce and Organisation Development

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- It was felt that mileage had decreased due to online meetings for both travel time and travel costs, and reassurance was given that savings shown were achievable for the service.

Transformation and Democratic Services

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- It was expressed that an increase in member travel may be seen in the near future with more councillors seeing the benefit of face-to-face meetings.
- 42 staff covered a variety of areas, staffing levels were already limited and other areas within the Council would not be able to conduct the work. After much challenge and discussion within the service additional savings proposals were not put forward and it was felt the service would be in demand to support the delivery of Sustainable Powys.

Property, Planning, & Public Protection

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- Savings around the running costs would be made under the proposal to dispose of/rent the Gwalia building within the financial year, however associated costs would be incurred during the relocation of staff.

- A challenge around flag poles was answered that they would be removed from corporate buildings but retained at County Hall, savings would be gained by less inspection, remedial work and health and safety compliance costs.
- If the 10% increase for cemetery fees was approved the service would be able to achieve full cost recovery for the service.
- Corporate building daily cleaning would continue for certain areas and main areas cleaned once a week.
- To increase estate income additional buildings (Auto Palace) would be opened shortly. Occupancy levels at other buildings (Abermule Business Park) would achieve one hundred percent occupancy and the disposal of commercial units would be considered.
- PAT testing compliance legislation would remain a key priority and health and safety standards would be met; however, it was felt that the Council was over testing and resources could be utilised in other areas.

Highways, Transport and Recycling

The Committee noted, observed, or requested that:

- The proposal shown for grass cutting included county roads in urban areas only which would result in one full cut and any safety cuts required, it excluded all trunk roads as the Council carry out a service on behalf of the Trunk Road Agency with a separate specification.
- Funding had been received to work with partners for grass cutting and collection which would support savings.
- Due to the magnitude of savings needed, it was felt that removing the need of a third party and bringing the residual waste service inhouse would benefit the Council. Assurances were provided that the Abermule Bulking Station was working within permits and closely monitored by Natural Resources Wales. Concerns were raised around contamination, smells, and noise. It was stressed that residents' concerns had been mitigated and no additional resources or equipment would be required, and the site would incur two additional vehicle movements per day.
- Climate change and wetter conditions led to concerns around the ditching reduction, it was expected that eighteen weeks less ditching would be carried out each year.
- A full cost exercise was underway in relation to comments made that the increase in bus fares contradicted the whole sustainable model of the Council for accessibility to public transport which was heavily underutilised.
- Soft market testing was being undertaken to explore the industry standards around charging and booking systems in Household Recycling Centres, and how to provide the best service for the Powys residents. Concerns were raised that fly tipping may increase.
- The Blue Badge charge in car parks was an estimated figure as there was no baseline figures to compare to and only snap survey data.
- LED street lighting would support the savings needed by reducing energy, dimming and part night (turn off at a certain time) plans were in place. It was stressed that only the county road network plans were proposed, and dark skies status may be impacted due to trunk roads running through towns.

- A kerbside collection was provided for day-to-day cardboard and household recycling centres available for larger items. Additional blue cardboard boxes could be provided to residents if needed.
- Appendix C - Post 16 transport was not a statutory service, and a consultation would be needed for 12 months before a decision could be made. An exploration of options was being undertaken.
- Appendix C – Clarification was provided that each road would be individually assessed before a decision was taken around the maintenance need for unclassified roads.
- It was explained that a capital fund was built up from money received from services for replacement vehicles. The proposal was to pause the fund in order to support the pressures within the service. It was hoped that grant funding could be gained to support the purchase of electric vehicles in the near future.
- Structural maintenance of roads was shown to reduce, it was explained a report would be compiled to demonstrate rising costs and how grant funding could support future works as capital projects were long term programmes.

Scrutiny’s Recommendation to Cabinet	Accept (plus Action & timescale)	Partially Accept (plus Rationale, Action & timescale)	Reject (plus Rationale)
1. Cabinet to consider options following concerns that the increase in bus fares contradicts the whole Council sustainable model for accessibility to public transport.		We partially accept the recommendation. However, it's important to note that bus fare increases have not increased for a number of years. We are aware of the importance of public transport particularly in a rural area, and there will be a fundamental review during 2024/25 to ensure we expand on the current provision that is sustainable and accessible for residents of Powys.	

Membership of the Economy, Residents and Communities Scrutiny Committee:
 County Councillors: A Davies (Chair), B Davies, A Jones, K Lewis, P James,

Finance Panel

The Panel noted, observed, or requested that:

- Officers explained the reason for the Council holding a Risk Budget, as a revenue budget, in addition to any of the Reserves budgets, for significant Service pressures. The level of risk budget held has been deemed to be sufficient and acceptable for the current levels of risk.
- Officers advised that a reserve for pay awards had been set up a couple of years ago, with the current balance at approximately £1m to part cover the full effect of any potential future pay award.
- An explanation was given on the increase of the levy for the BBNPA (Bannau Brycheiniog National Parks Authority) and Panel would welcome further information on the total funding streams and the Councils contribution. Such information would help shape the Councils response to the proposed fourth National Park.
- Clarification was given that the Teachers' pay awards funding was included in the overall Education Budget.
- Officers provided clarification on the Council Tax Base Rate for 2024/25 as at 64,536 Band D equivalent properties. Further detail was available in the Council Tax Base report which was considered by Cabinet in November 2023.
- Council tax paid by Powys residents contributes £105 million, 31% of Powys County Council net spend, which was significantly higher than the Welsh average.
- Confirmation was given that school pupil numbers within the Primary and Secondary Sectors had reduced, with an increase being seen in Special Schools. Officers advised that some deficit positions were historic as schools had not reacted or responded quickly enough to the challenges and changes in pupil numbers can make. When reports state that pupil numbers had fallen, the precise number should be reported.
- Collaborative work would continue between schools, Schools Service finance team, School Improvement Officers, and HR.
- There remained concern around the limited resources aligned to the Schools Transformation Programme regarding improving provision.
- The Capital expenditure for school transformation had reduced substantially, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Transformation explained that the schools Transformation programmes future plans were very clear, and the pace of transformation would be monitored in line with affordability and levels of risk.

- Assurance was sought and given that the Risk budget and Reserves held were adequate. The S151 Officer added that the appropriate level of reserves, could be at a minimum level and still be appropriate, and would endeavour to ensure an optimum balance between the level of risk and reserves.
- Clarification sought on whether the heightened level of risk was greater than the previous year. Officers responded that levels of inflation were now declining, if this continued the level of risk would reduce. However, due to volatility and the impact of world events the risk level was still heightened.
- Panel Members had received limited information on Sustainable Powys, the wider time horizon and fundamental risks associated. It was acknowledged by Officers that the budget gap projected over the next 5 years was not aided as there was uncertainty working with annual settlements. The work undertaken by the Wales Fiscal Analysis Team had projected that Local Government funding in the next few years would be constrained and that any increase in funding generated by Councils would likely arise through Council Tax increases
- There was no evidence of Sustainable Powys being delivered within this budget.
- Pay and non-pay pressures in the school delegated budget should have been expressed in Table 5 as per previous years and other Service Areas. Any changes in Service Level Agreements should also be reflected as a pressure.
- The cost reductions quoted in budget papers 2023/24 for 2024/25 should be reflected in the budget papers for this year, and differentiation highlighted, this should be made clear i.e., HTR 'temporary' reduction in the revenue contribution to the transport reserve.
- A Cabinet report should be received by Full Council concerning any additional funding received, with a clear explanation of its allocation before budget is set.
- Panel shared officers' concerns that significant grants were unknown at the time of budget setting.
- Stronger business cases need to be built in relation to all early retirement packages including Teachers.
- Delays in capital programmes impact maintenance backlogs.
- An explanation of how the £10 Million/year asset disposal target will be achieved was requested.
- Support from Welsh Government for capital expenditure in Schools is a 9-year rolling programme and the Council's Capital programme should reflect this as suggested by the Governance and Audit Committee.
- Concerns expressed by Panel Members of the affordability to residents for the proposed 7.5% council tax increase. Powys residents were paying 14% more Council Tax than the Welsh average.

Finance Panel Recommendation to Cabinet	Accept (plus Action & timescale)	Partially Accept (plus Rationale, Action & timescale)	Reject (plus Rationale)
1. The projected reserves balance for the end of the	This will be included in the final budget report.		

<p>financial year should be included in Table 3 as an additional column, to demonstrate planned use of reserves during the financial year.</p>			
<p>2. Stronger business cases need to be built in relation to all early retirement packages, including Teachers.</p>			<p>There is a process in place.</p>
<p>3. That all additional financial receipts are reported to the Full Council before the budget is set.</p>			<p>This is already a given. Council will be fully informed of any additional funding provided. And any changes arising from the final settlement.</p>
<p>4. Greater care should be taken to explain fully the changes made between the financial years in the capital programme and the cost reduction tables.</p>		<p>Care is being taken; the budget proposal is supported by detailed appendices. Members are given the opportunity to scrutinise the detail of the proposal through members briefing sessions and the formal scrutiny process. Through challenge and scrutiny more detail can be provided on any individual proposals if required.</p> <p>Cabinet acknowledge that reprofiling of schemes in the capital programme can distort the comparison of annual allocations, but changes are reported through the capital monitoring reports throughout the year.</p>	
<p>5. There is little evidence of the promised transformation of services within this budget to enable Powys to live within its</p>			<p>The budget proposal includes cost reductions relating to sustainable Powys Projects and some indicative estimates of further savings are included in future years of the plan. A number of reviews are being progressed</p>

<p>financial constraints. Greater progress needs to be demonstrated.</p>			<p>including the Leisure Review, the Farms estate review, Social Services transformation, and reductions have already been made across transformation projects already in place including children services closer to home and preventative strategies, digital transformation, finance transformation etc. Members have been involved in a series of workshops most recently around place-based planning all setting out the direction of travel. Full details of proposals will be informed by public participation and consultation that will take place over the coming months and the proposals can then be included with more certainty and in more detail in the Councils financial plan.</p> <p>The budget proposed sets a stable platform on which the proposals can be developed.</p>
<p>6. That the Cabinet Support the Governance and Audit Committee’s request for the re-implementation of a 10-year Capital programme which would better align with the Welsh Government’s 9 year rolling Schools Transformation programme.</p>			<p>Cabinet cannot support the publication of a 10 year Capital Programme. Economic uncertainty nationally both from a funding perspective and more generally the impact on costs and borrowing rates makes it difficult to make firm commitments for additional investment too far ahead and it is unwise to raise expectations without that certainty. Our plans are also intrinsically linked with the sustainable Powys so both plans will be developed in tandem as this develops. We are clear that our current investment decisions have been made in line with the sustainable development principles of the future generations act and again the uncertainty beyond 5 years makes it more difficult to make that assessment.</p>

<p>7. That the Cabinet explain how the £10 Million/year asset disposal target will be achieved.</p>			<p>This is a target and the detail will be developed as assets are reviewed, managed, rationalised and released based on sustainable Powys proposals. The councils 600 assets creates a significant liability, and in order to manage the property estate effectively, and invest where needed to deliver services and meet Net zero requirements it is inevitable that some assets will have to be released to reduce costs and maintain affordability. Decisions as to what will be retained and what will be released will be driven by sustainable Powys and considered in line with the Councils Asset Management policies.</p>
--	--	--	--

Membership of the Finance Panel:
County Councillors A W Davies (Chair), A Jones, E Vaughan, G Preston,
P Lewington, C Kenyon-Wade.
Independent / Lay Member: G Hall.