

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

**(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot and
Microsoft Teams)**

Members Present:

6 March 2024

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

Councillors: T.Bowen, H.C.Clarke, C.Clement-Williams,
C.Galsworthy, J.Henton, J.Jones, R.G.Jones,
S.Paddison, R.Phillips, S.Pursey, S.H.Reynolds
and A.J.Richards

**Officers In
Attendance** K.Jones, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas, N.Pearce,
C.Griffiths, H.Jones, J.Woodman-Ralph,
N.Daniel, P.Chivers, S.Curran, C.Furlow-Harris,
S.Griffiths, A.James, R.Livingstone,
L.McAndrew, S.McCluskie, N.Jones,
A.O'Donnell, C.Plowman, G. Powell, M.Shaw,
J.Stevens and A.Thomas

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors W.F.Griffiths, J.Hale, S.Harris,
S.K.Hunt, J.Hurley, N.Jenkins, S.A.Knoyle,
A.Llewelyn and C.Phillips

1. **Chairs Announcements**

The chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

None received.

3. **Pre-decision Scrutiny**

Revenue Budget Proposals 2024/25

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members queried the difference in net income from the figures in the report that went out for consultation and the report for consideration at the meeting. It was noted that the budget gap had reduced by around £230,000 between the two reports. However, the level of council tax required to close the gap has also decreased from 10.3% to 7.9%. Members queried how the calculations were determined in relation to the income set out in both reports and what measures are being taken to ensure that the forecast for the income is accurate.

Officers advised that the draft budget proposals noted that the council tax could increase to approximately 10% however there was no specific proposal given in the consultation with regards to the figure required to close the gap. The reason for the significant difference relates to assumptions around the council tax support scheme. In December a prudent approach was taken with regards to the figures with a very prudent estimate of net council tax. When the figures then came forward, these were able to be input as required, which reflected the significantly less costs of the council tax reduction scheme.

Officers were confident that the figures in the report were prudent and that the 7.9% council tax can be met.

Officers advised that a detailed accurate report would not be possible during December as the later detailed report required Capita to input the various changes to benefit figures into their software externally in order to run the required reports.

Members asked for the changes between the two reports to be clearly outlined. Officers agreed to note the points made in relation to clearly outlining where figures are prudent and where worst-case scenario figures are shown this should be clearly highlighted within the report with an explanation. Officers will ensure these ideas are encompassed in next year's reports.

Members queried the number of responses received in comparison to the previous year and if there was a way of increasing participation, by perhaps looking at what other local authorities are doing.

Officers advised that last year between paper and online questionnaires there were 581 responses received compared to 556 completed questionnaires this year. There were 13 responses

received by email/letter last year with 6 received this year. Last year 225 NPT employees engaged with the consultation compared to 146 this year. Last year 147 people attended meetings with only 52 attending this year. In terms of working with other Councils, officers confirmed that they were part of working groups who were discussing various ways to engage with citizens. Officers confirmed that the consultation period did not run over Christmas last year. This year it was out of officers hands in terms of the timing of the settlement announcement so the consultation being held over Christmas could not be avoided. Officers also confirmed, if the consultation period allows, in the future they would try and engage with community events to encourage participation. There is also currently an ongoing drive to recruit to the Citizens Panel. Members expressed their keenness to ensure that the younger generations were suitably engaged with and suggested that perhaps more work could be done in relation to social media.

Officers confirmed that the limits for in year virement are up to £100,000 for corporate directors, £250,000 for Cabinet and £500,000 for Council. There is a £2.8 million revenue fund budget in relation to energy efficiencies for civic buildings and schools. Members outlined their understanding was that £1.5m had been allocated to the Environment and Education Directorates. The remaining funding appears to have been vired to Capital Programmes. Members queried when the decision was taken and who authorised it. Officers confirmed that the £2.8m remains in the revenue budget for 23/24 where it was first authorised and that it was not vired to other budgets. Officers confirmed that £1.5m of the budget was spent as agreed within the Environment and Education directorate's, 700k was used for reserves and there is a projected underspend of 600k. Officers confirmed that there have been no virements in year of that £2.8m budget.

As a result of the one payment, Education received a £721,000 one off payment to assist with fuel poverty in schools. Energy costs in schools total £4.7million across the borough. Members were concerned that moving forward the schools will not be funded to a sufficient level to prevent fuel poverty and this will also result in an inability to deliver the school development plan, where reserves will be essentially wiped out.

The Director of Education shared his concerns around the levels of deficits in some schools. Every school who is currently in a deficit has a recovery plan. Officers confirmed in last year's schools delegated

budget, there was an uplift the budgets of the year before by 50%. Costs of fuel for schools is certainly higher than was put into the schools delegated budget even with the top up provided. The shortfall of funding would contribute to the overall overspend of all schools. Some of the overspend can be attributed to schools still spending their reserves on covid recovery and some schools are struggling to balance their budgets as a result of costs in relation to funding additional learning needs.

Members advised that they were aware of one school that had started the financial year in a surplus of £12,000 however had projected to close the financial year at a deficit of £95,000. Members expressed their concern about this level of debt if multiplied across the borough throughout various school and noted the concerns that had been raised by the Director in terms of some elements of the budget being sustainable for the future.

Members expressed their concern at possible losses of both teaching and non-teaching staff as schools may not be able afford to continue to employ them within projected budgets.

Officers advised that the issues raised is a pan Walse and will need to be managed as its moved forward. Schools being in deficit will pose a risk to the authority. The variation of schools in surplus and deficit across the authority is quite wide ranging. A lot of these issues will be considered at a forthcoming sustainability review to be undertaken.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

Capital Strategy and Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2026/27

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members noted that the Levelling-up fund does not include the two additional schemes in Port Talbot which were agreed earlier in the year and queried if there was a reason why they were currently omitted from the capital programme. Officers confirmed that the way the Levelling Up Fund is managed by UK Government is that they advise you if your bid has been successful, and in this case two projects were successful and confirmation has been received indicating that the bids were successful. However, the authority has still not yet received confirmation of the formal funding agreement

from UK Government and until this is received the projects can't be incorporated into the capital programme.

Members sought clarification in relation to some items, in particular relation to the PDR Network Management and Dock Road Feeder Bridge and also what is included under Other Regeneration Schemes? Officers confirmed in terms of the PDR there are repair works being undertaken around the roundabout in Margam next to the works entrance as there is some damage to the carriage way at the location. In relation to the bridge there are minor concrete repairs and improvements/repairs to the barriers there. The works referred to are being paid for with what is remaining from the PDR money received.

Officers advised that in relation to the projects which fall under Other Regeneration Schemes, they will circulate a list following the meeting outlining the specifics of the projects.

Members raised queries in reference to the reallocation of money relating to Neath Transport Hub and that there is a mention of site relocation issues and works ongoing around this. Members queried if there were any significant changes that members need to be aware of in relation to the project. Officers confirmed that there are no significant changes. Currently site investigation work is being undertaken and this will be completed by the end of March.

With reference to the former Youth Offending Team building adjacent to the Magistrates Court, members queried if this was another office based scheme that the authority were looking to deliver? Officers confirmed that the building is located within the harbourside area and that the authority are purchasing and refurbishing the building on a speculative basis as there is a high demand in this area for office accommodation.

Members queried if there is any capital allocation for parks and playgrounds? Officers confirmed the current allocation under the Clean Up Green Up Scheme, and all works in relation to this on parks and playgrounds will be completed by the end of March, with the exception of the playground located at Aberavon beach. However, officers confirmed that there is no specific allocation under the proposed allocations for improvement to playgrounds the forthcoming year. It was confirmed by officers that maintenance on current assets will continue.

Members asked for officers to clarify the exact location of works being carried out in relation to the PDR. Officer agreed to clarify and circulate to members.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

Treasury Management Strategy, Annual Investment Strategy, and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

There were no questions raised during the meeting.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

4. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON