

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

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

Members Present:

20 December 2023

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

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

**Officers In
Attendance** K.Jones, A.Jarrett, A.D.Thomas, N.Pearce,
C.Griffiths, H.Jones, N.Daniel, C.Furlow,
A.James, C.Howard, N.Blackmore,
L.McAndrew, T.Davies and A.Thomas

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

1. Chairs Announcements

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Declarations of Interests

Cllr S Reynolds, Cabinet Agenda Item 6 – Trustee of Canolfan Maerdry – Personal, Prejudicial (will leave the room when this item is discussed)

Cllr J Henton – Cabinet Agenda Item 6 – Chair of Dyffryn, Clydach and Bryncoch Historical Society, Personal. Dispensation to speak and vote on this item.

Cllr S Pursey – Cabinet Agenda Item – Trustee of Taibach Community Library, Personal. Dispensation to speak and vote on this item.

3. **Pre-decision Scrutiny**

Budget 2024/25

Members considered the report as circulated within the Cabinet agenda pack.

The Chief Executive outlined the challenging budget position for 2024/25. An extensive exercise has been carried out for increasing income and decreasing expenditure for the year, whilst maintaining jobs and services within the Council. It was noted that Welsh Government have published the provisional settlement prior to the meeting. The proposed settlement for 2024/25 is going to worsen the budget position beyond what is detailed within the report. The intention is for officers to carry out an assessment in readiness for January to formally report on the analysis undertaken on the impact of the provisional budget. Further, how the Council can further bridge the increased gap in the Council's resources for 2024/25.

Members queried why the request for permission to consult has been considered late in December and why it was not sought earlier so that consultation could begin sooner? Officers confirmed that they have been working to ensure that all income generation and expenditure proposals were fully explored before consultation begins.

Officers have consulted on some specific proposals within the report. Officers outlined which items have been out to public consultation. Where things, have been able to go out to consultation earlier, this has been done.

Members queried items in the budget which indicate covering core expenditure from grants, and if this would have a knock-on effect in delivering front line services. Officers advised that it was for individual consideration by directorates and about ensuring that the grant was maximised for full use within the budget.

Members raised the current inflation and pay award ongoing concerns and queried if the 4% provision in the budget was sufficient. Officers advised that the 4% has been benchmarked with the other 21 local authorities in Wales and it is consistent with others forecast. Officers were confident that this would be sufficient.

Page 2 of the report which indicates that the budget supports local policy initiatives prioritised by the Rainbow Coalition. These initiatives

are referring to those that have been agreed within the Corporate Plan.

Page 4 outlines a £3.5m gap. Officers advised that this is the £3.5m which was used to balance the 23/24 budget which now needs to be placed within this year's budget.

Page 11 refers to delivering local and Welsh Government policies. Members queried if there are there any policies planned to come from Welsh Government that we know are not going to be funded. Officers advised that they were not aware of any at the moment. However, it was noted that the overall settlement doesn't fund what we currently require.

Officers confirmed that the 7.5% increase in income receipts, assumes that each income line with have a 7.5% increase, however it would be up to individual directorates to determine how they achieve this. For example, it could be a mixture of increased charges and increase in volume.

Members queried, based on the change in the revenue grant indicated by Welsh Government 0.3%, members queried what this looked like for the gap created and an indication with regards to what council tax would need to be to close that gap. Officers confirmed that the decrease would present a gap of an additional £870,000, based on the model presented.

Members queried how much of the revenue budget is contingency budget. Officers outlined the contingency in relation to the pay award and energy efficient budget. However indicated that there is an overall contingency of £700,000.

Members queried the amount in general reserves about the recommended amount. It was indicated that there could be approximately £1m however due to the overspend in year currently projected, officers advised that there would unlikely be any contingency in general reserves.

Members noted that there is a broad objective indicated to reduce civic centres from three to two. A large saving could be made through the reduction of energy costs. Officers advised that this was still broadly the objective and it is the intention that a report will be brought back in the new year with options for members to consider.

In relation to Env 12/13 it notes the termination of public access and rights agreement and the termination of license agreement in reference to Neath canal, members queried what was meant by this. Officers advised that currently there is a license agreement with the owner of the canal to enable use for leisure purposes of a section of the canal north of Resolven and also a public access agreement to the Southern end of the canal going through Briton Ferry to enable access to the tow path. The cost of the two licenses is £135,000 per year. Officers confirmed that NPT have extensive rights of way along the tow path however there are gaps. NPT officers will need to establish whether or not they can demonstrate in the gap that there is a right of way argument to put forward to the owner to secure that status or whether NPT could just have a public access agreement. Therefore, instead of paying the owner of the canal to maintain the area, this is incorporated as part of NPT's maintenance schedule.

Members suggested there is a risk that public access right could be lost along the active travel route established in Briton Ferry. Officers advised that there are a number of routes which have permissive active rights. Officers will explore all options to try and ensure that those routes are maintained.

In relation to street lighting, the Chief Executive confirmed that this would be a separate consultation to the budget consultation.

Members outlined their concerns with regards Celtic Leisure and the postponement of bringing the service inhouse. Further, that a business plan has not yet been explored and put forward in relation to this item. The Leader outlined the steps that had been taken to liaise with staff on the decision to defer the date to bring the service back in house. The Cabinet Member confirmed that a business case was drawn up however due to a number of items changing that fell outside the control of the Council, for example rising energy costs, it was unable to proceed.

Officers referred to page 26 of the report, specifically L4, which sets out over the lifespan of the medium term financial plan a proposal to reduce the running costs of Celtic Leisure to a total sum of £660,000. In terms of fixed costs, officers confirmed that when the service is insourced, there will be associated additional costs of £1.3m, relating to rates and staff costs.

Officers confirmed the business plan was worked on last year, when the timeframe indicated that Celtic Leisure would be insourced 1st April 2023. When the decision was taken to delay the insourcing, the business plan was deferred. It was confirmed that when the Council is ready to insource, the business plan will be brought forward.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

Third Sector Grant Funding - Award of Grants for 2024 – 2025

Officers confirmed that since the report was published it has been confirmed that a number of organisations have submitted the same bids for funding into several funding pots. The NPT scheme is a pot of last resort not first resort. All bids for funding should be accessing other pots first. The outcomes of other bids need to be determined before this award is considered. Only two of the organisations listed will be recommended for award.

Members queried why there were two options presented and the background for the rationale behind this. Officers confirmed due to the general funding position there was an over subscription to the fund. The options outlined the choices to members.

The Chair confirmed the officer amended recommendation 'that the granting (identified in Appendix 1 to the circulated report) to Canolfan Maerdy and Ystalyfera Development Trust, be approved, and it be noted that the additional requests for grants be brought to a future meeting of Cabinet in January 2024 for determination by Members.'

Following scrutiny, the amended recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

4. Urgent Items

There were none.

CHAIRPERSON