

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

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

Members Present:

28 February 2024

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

Councillors: H.C.Clarke, C.Galsworthy, J.Henton, J.Jones,
R.G.Jones, S.Paddison, R.Phillips, S.Pursey
and S.H.Reynolds

**Officers In
Attendance** K.Jones, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas, N.Pearce,
C.Griffiths, H.Jones, N.Daniel, C.Furlow-Harris
and A.Thomas

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

1. **Chairs Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

It was confirmed that the committee would be scrutinising items 8 and 9 from the Cabinet Board Agenda.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meetings held on 20 December 2023, 22 January 2024 and 21 February 2024 were approved as true and accurate records.

4. **Pre-decision Scrutiny**

Revenue Budget Monitoring - Quarter 3

Members thanked officers for providing clarity outside of the meeting, in relation to £3.87m mentioned on page 24 of the report, which has been moved back into specific reserves due to uncompleted works. Members questioned whether a sufficient number of officers were in place to complete necessary works during the revenue year.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that two items made up the majority of the £3.87m moving back into reserves; £2.379m relates to a delay in purchasing large recycling vehicles, which has been postponed whilst a fleet review is undertaken. An amount of £700k was budgeted for remodelling the Crumlin Burrows Transfer Station, this work has been delayed until 2025. There are 12 other entries going back to reserves; challenges in staff recruitment has been a contributory factor particularly in the Environment Directorate.

The Director for Environment and Regeneration confirmed the circumstances that have been outlined and advised members that market supplements had been used with some success in certain services to address staff recruitment issues. There is outstanding budget to tackle the capacity issues that have been discussed with members previously.

Members referred to page 30 of the report contained within the agenda report pack and the projected energy, efficiency, transition and contingency £600k underspend. Members enquired whether the £700k that is stated as being transferred into the accommodation reserve to fund energy efficiency lighting schemes during 2024/25 will be transferred as a capital or revenue project.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the funding will be transferred into the accommodation reserve which is a revenue reserve. The projects will be delivered as capital projects but will be funded from a revenue reserve. It was noted that capital expenditure can be funded from revenue reserves but not vice versa. Two large scale led lighting refurbishment projects have been identified in the Quays and Neath Civic Centre but were undeliverable by the end of this financial year, funding has been transferred into reserves for use next year when the projects will be built into the capital programme.

Members questioned why the projects were not identified as capital projects from the outset and why there was such an underspend.

The Director of Environment and Regeneration advised members that efforts were being made to establish a team of officers concentrating on areas such as energy efficiency, net zero carbon, climate change and ecology. There has been difficulties in growing the team to the required capacity. A number of staff are tasked to decrease the energy costs of the authority, ensuring assets are operating as efficiently as possible. Regular building studies are undertaken, and business cases are in place to demonstrate where there is a return on investment should capital schemes be progressed. Much of the work of the team is business as usual activity, therefore there is no specific budget code for the work and it is carried out within salary costs, which are consumed by the Environment Directorate.

Members asked whether a sufficient number of staff were available to drive projects forward to reduce energy costs.

The Director of Environment and Regeneration confirmed that there continues to be an insufficient number of staff in the team but a budget and structure is in place to address this. Currently, there are two technical experts and one administration officer in post who have responsibility for building assets in addition to strategy objectives to reduce carbon footprint and energy consumption. There has been a very poor level of interest to some of the vacant posts but interviews are being held for the Manager post shortly. It was noted that it is challenging to secure the appropriately skilled people to deliver the councils objectives.

Members referred to page 26 of the report contained within the agenda pack and expressed concern at the change in the reserve position of schools. Members questioned whether any schools are not going to be in a deficit situation or whether schools would be considering redundancies due to the funding situation.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning advised members that there is an awareness of schools current financial situations and likely positions going forward. Any schools that are currently in deficit have recovery plans in place. It is likely that redundancies will take place in some schools going forward due to the overspend position across the whole school sector; schools may consider voluntary redundancies to avoid compulsory redundancies.

Members asked if there was an average cost for any reviews undertaken by the council.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the cost of each review was linked to the amount of work involved, and therefore there was no average cost. It was noted that most reviews are signed off by Cabinet or Cabinet Boards so members will be aware of costs involved. Each review will have a business case stating the costs will be repaid by savings delivered.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

Capital Budget Monitoring - Quarter 3

Members requested an update of spend in relation to the Pontardawe Arts Centre Cinema project.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed the start date for the Pontardawe Arts Centre Cinema project was delayed. Member approval was sought to continue with the project, due to insufficient funding. The contractor is due to start on site within the next three weeks which will result in more spend in terms of design work and materials.

Members referred to page 47 of the report and asked for further information in relation to £441k that is yet to be spent on the Regeneration Harbourside Infrastructure.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed more narrative would be contained in future reports. In relation to the large infrastructure project on the Harbourside, this was funded by European funding which was match funded from council funding. The residual funds remaining will be used to settle the final account, once this is agreed.

Members referred to page 54 of the agenda report pack and questioned whether the £10k budget for the Neath Library refurbishment, related to the old or new library. Members also requested further information in relation to the £10k budget for the Byass works site.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed the budget for the Neath Library related to a feasibility study to explore the potential refurbishment of the old Neath library. The Director of Environment & Regeneration

confirmed the budget for the Byass Works site related to the development of a masterplan within the wider Harbourside area. Due diligence and feasibility studies are being carried out in the area to establish what can be delivered and whether aspirations are achievable.

Members referred to page 45 of the report and raised concern that grants were not fully utilised in relation to the Capital Maintenance for Schools.

The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the budget line shows a spend of 2.379m at the end of December against a budget of 2.9m. There has been a delay in some expenditure but it is expected that the budget will be fully utilised. The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that with reference to the Supporting Learners with Additional Learning Needs £60k spend against the 1.3m budget, works are progressing on the provision at Blaenhonddan and Ysgol Hendrefelin. There have been some delays between works being completed and invoicing.

Following scrutiny, the recommendation was supported to Cabinet.

5. **Forward Work Programme 2023/24**

The Forward Work Programme was noted.

6. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

**Cllr. P Rogers
CHAIRPERSON**