

COUNCIL

(Civic Centre, Port Talbot)

Members Present:

26 July 2024

The Mayor: Councillor Matthew Crowley

The Deputy Mayor: Councillor Wayne Carpenter

Councillors: C.Clement-Williams, A.Dacey, R.Davies, S.E.Freeguard, C.Galsworthy, N.Goldup-John, W.F.Griffiths, S.Grimshaw, J.Hale, S.Harris, M.Harvey, L.Heard, J.Henton, S.K.Hunt, J.Hurley, N.Jenkins, J.Jones, L.Jones, R.G.Jones, S.Jones, S.A.Knoyle, E.V.Latham, C.Lewis, A.Llewelyn, A.Lodwig, K.Morris, S.Paddison, D.M.Peters, C.Phillips, S.Rahaman, P.A.Rees, S.Renkes, S.H.Reynolds, G.Rice, A.J.Richards, P.D.Richards, P.Rogers, S.Thomas, D.Whitelock, L.Williams and R.W.Wood

Officers in Attendance: S.Curran, N.Daniel, C.Griffiths, K.Jones, C.Morris, T.Rees, M.Shaw, A.Thomas, A.Thomas and A.Thomas

Representatives of the Translation Service: Present

1. **Mayor's Announcements**

The Mayor wished the 31 Welsh athletes that will be competing in the Paris Olympics well, and made particular reference to Daniel Jervis from Resolven who will be taking part in his second Olympics in the 1500m swimming freestyle.

The Mayor also congratulated Derek Salisbury from Port Talbot, Chair of Neath Hockey Club who was honoured in the Kings Honours List and received an MBE for his services to hockey in South Wales.

2. **Leader's Announcements**

There were none.

3. **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

4. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting of Council**

RESOLVED: that the previous minutes be approved as an accurate record.

5. **Public Question Time.**

None received.

6. **Budget 2025-26 -Outlook**

The Chief Executive advised Council of the financial outlook for 2025-26 and the broad approach that will be taken to support the setting of the Council's revenue and capital budgets for the financial year 25/26.

Council were informed that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Cabinet Office in her statement of 11th June 2024 recognises the challenging context and makes clear that we must prepare for difficult decisions and trade-offs in our planning. A Welsh Spending Review is to be undertaken and this will drive the Welsh Government's future annual budgets.

It was highlighted that the statement makes clear that there will be an emphasis on key priorities for Wales – reducing NHS waiting lists; support for children in early years; educational excellence in our schools; better, greener jobs; secure homes; and improved transport links across the country. The incoming Labour Government following the General Election held on 4th July 2024 is yet to signal whether it will adjust current spending plans. Welsh Government advise, for 2025-26, we should base our planning on NO uplift to the Revenue Support Grant.

It was explained that the scale of the challenge a cash flat Settlement presents for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council was set out in the body of the report and that work has already started to identify

the measures that will need to be considered to achieve a balanced budget for the next financial year.

The Chief Finance Officer detailed to members the financial modelling and based on the latest assumptions highlighted to Council that the budget gap for 2025/2026 is £18.061m before any increases to Council Tax. In his role as the Council's section 151 Officer, he made it clear to members the very serious financial position the Council is in. He explained there is some resilience in relation to the Council's reserve position but clarified that this is not a long term solution.

Directors gave detailed breakdowns of the budget pressures being faced in their services areas as detailed in the report:

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning highlighted in particular that Neath Port Talbot is the only Council in Wales where schools are in an overall deficit position. This is in relation to Teachers Pay awards not being appropriately funded, energy costs and the ALN support requirements.

The Director of Social Services outlined the significant increase to demand and complexity to the service. Concerns were raised regarding Welsh Government and Home Office policy decisions which are resulting in an unsustainable position for Local Government given the ever increasing numbers of vulnerable people in our communities.

The Director of Environment and Regeneration made particular reference to energy costs, construction inflation and costs of raw materials as well as the ambitious unfunded decarbonisation targets from Welsh Government WG decarbonisation targets.

The Director of Strategy and Corporate Services made reference to increased and unfunded regulatory, legislative and digital requirements from Welsh Government.

It was reiterated that the many years of austerity, coupled with the series of economic shocks in recent years and the prospect of further significant reductions to the Council's funding base, will have very negative overall consequences for the services and functions the Council operate, the number of people it will be able to employ and rates of council tax, fees and charges and members of Council were urged to lobby UK and Welsh Government to start funding Local Government appropriately.

RESOLVED: That the potential for there to be no increase to the Revenue Support Grant in 2025-26 and the serious implications this will have for services, jobs, fees and charges and council tax levels be noted.

7. **Corporate Plan 2024/2027**

Members received the Corporate Plan for 2024/2027: Working towards a more prosperous, fairer and greener NPT as contained within the circulated report.

It was clarified that a summary of the aspirations and key elements would be provided.

RESOLVED: that the Council adopt the Corporate Plan for the period 2024/2027.

That Council note the priorities will need to be subject ongoing review given the level of uncertainty in terms of available revenue and capital resources provided by Government.

That the Director of Strategy & Corporate Services be granted delegated authority in consultation with the Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Executive to make any further changes that are necessary prior to final publication and which do not materially change the content of the Plan.

8. **Democratic Services Committee Annual Report**

The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee presented the Annual Report 2023/24. Members expressed thanks to the Democratic Services Team for their support.

RESOLVED: That Council note and endorse the Democratic Services Committee Annual Report 2023/24 attached at Appendix 1.

9. **Standards Committee Annual Report**

Craig Griffiths, Head of Legal and Democratic Services presented Council with the Standards Committee Annual Report representing the Chair of the Standards Committee, Mrs Louise Fleet.

Members were reminded that there is now a legal requirement for Standards Committees to make an annual report to the full Council on the standards regime within Neath Port Talbot.

Members were asked to take particular note of the new duty in respect of group leaders and their obligation to ensure ethical behaviours and conduct. The Standards Committee was pleased to report the engagement of group leaders and to provide an assurance to Council in that regard.

Members were urged to remain mindful of the fundamental importance of high standards of conduct in order for members of the public to maintain their trust and confidence in local democracy.

RESOLVED: That Standards Committee Annual Report 2023-2024 be noted and the recommendations included therein.

10. **Scrutiny Committees Annual Reports**

The Scrutiny Champion, Cllr Phil Rogers presented the Scrutiny Annual Reports for 2023/24. Members expressed thanks to the Scrutiny Team for their support.

RESOLVED: That Council note and endorse the Scrutiny Committees Annual Reports 2023/24.

11. **Establishment of a Freeport Joint Scrutiny Committee**

Members received the proposal to establish a Joint Scrutiny Committee for the Celtic Freeport Joint Committee with Pembrokeshire County Council as contained within the circulated report.

RESOLVED: That the establishment of a Joint Scrutiny Committee for the Celtic Freeport Joint Committee on the terms identified in the Joint Committee Establishment Agreement enclosed at Appendix 1 be approved.

That the Members identified at paragraph 9 of the circulated report be appointed as the Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council members of the

Joint Scrutiny Committee for the Celtic Freeport
Joint Committee.

12. **Committee Membership**

RESOLVED: that the following changes to Council Committee membership be agreed:

That Cllr Helen Ceri Clarke be removed as a member of the Community, Finance and Strategic Leadership Scrutiny Committee.

That Cllr Angharad Aubrey be appointed as a member of the Community, Finance and Strategic Leadership Scrutiny Committee.

That Cllr Angharad Aubrey be removed as a member of the Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny Committee.

That Cllr Helen Ceri Clarke be appointed as a member of the Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny Committee.

That Cllr Wayne Carpenter be removed as a member of the Governance and Audit Committee.

That Cllr Andy Ludwig be appointed as a member of the Governance and Audit Committee.

13. **Notice of Motion under Section 10 of Part 4 (Rules of Procedure) the Council's Constitution**

There was one notice of motion received under Section 10 of Part 4 (Rules of Procedure) of the Council's Constitution.

The following Notice of Motion was proposed by Cllr Simon Knoyle and seconded by Cllr Sarah Thomas was APPROVED.

It is noted that:

Recent years have been characterised by considerable volatility as a result of world and domestic events.

Specifically:

- The pandemic period has left a significant legacy with high numbers of people requiring support from social services, homelessness services and more young people presenting with additional learning needs and more young people needing additional help to attend school and participate in their education;
- Energy prices, general inflation and interest rates have sharply increased. Although inflation has now returned to 2%, many goods and services remain more costly and energy prices and interest rates remain high;
- The cost of living crisis continues with many of our residents and local businesses experiencing financial hardship;
- Whilst there has been a small increase in the number of people unemployed, the labour market remains very competitive and this is reflected in higher prices for services. The council is also continuing to experience difficulty filling some roles in our organisation. A worrying large number of people of working age are economically inactive and not looking for work;
- Capital projects have become more challenging to deliver as a consequence of a number of factors identified above; and
- Whilst the Council is engaged in a range of significant economic development opportunities and is also a key partner in responding to the challenging and complex changes at Tata Steel UK Ltd, the cumulative impact of these developments is challenging to resource whilst uncertainty remains.

The revenue settlements from Welsh Government in the last two financial years – 2023/4 and 2004/5 fell substantially short of what the Council needed to deliver its services and functions. Additional pressures of some £70 million were identified for the two year period with Welsh Government providing some £26.9 million funding. Budget cuts, additional income, including council tax increases have been necessary to balance the budget – the associated change management activity has increased workloads, placing further pressure across the organisation.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Cabinet Office in her statement of 11th June 2024 recognises the challenging context and makes clear that we must prepare for difficult decisions and trade-offs in our planning. A Welsh Spending Review is to be undertaken and this will drive the Welsh Government's future annual

budgets. The statement makes clear that there will be an emphasis on key priorities for Wales – reducing NHS waiting lists; support for children in early years; educational excellence in our schools; better, greener jobs; secure homes; and improved transport links across the country.

The incoming Labour Government following the General Election held on 4th July 2024 is yet to signal whether it will adjust current spending plans. Welsh Government advise, for 2025-26, we should base our planning on NO uplift to the Revenue Support Grant.

The scale of the challenge a cash flat Settlement presents for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council is serious. Work has already started to identify the measures that will need to be considered to achieve a balanced budget for the next financial year. The many years of austerity, coupled with the series of economic shocks in recent years and the prospect of further significant reductions to the Council's funding base, will have very negative overall consequences for the services and functions we operate, the number of people we will be able to employ and rates of council tax, fees and charges.

Accordingly, it is resolved that:

- Members note the serious implications that will stem from no increases to the Revenue Support Grant in 2025-2026 on services, jobs, fees and charges and council tax levels.
- The Leader of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, on behalf of all elected members, write to UK and Welsh Government highlighting the pressures which are identified in this motion and expressing serious concern over the potential for no uplift to the revenue support grant and to call on UK and Welsh Government to provide adequate funding to enable the sustainability of councils.

14. **Questions from Members, with Notice, under Rule 9.2 of the Council's Procedure Rules**

Two question from Members with Notice under Rule 9.2 of the Council's Procedure Rules were received.

Question 1:

Cllr Stephanie Grimshaw asked the following:

“Plan International UK has released a report highlighting the state of girls’ rights across the UK, with Neath Port Talbot alarmingly identified as the most challenging place in Wales to live as a girl. What specific measures are the Council taking to address the barriers that women and girls face in the borough? Additionally, will the council develop an action plan based on the issues raised in the report?”

Cllr Simon Knoyle, Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Social Justice provided the following response:

Can I thank my colleague cabinet member Cllr Sian Harris and the Director of Social Services, Housing and Community Safety for enabling local young people supported by our HOPE service to contribute to this research. It is good to see that as well as ensuring young people are shaping the way we are responding to the issues facing women and girls at a local level, we are also helping our young people to shape research like this which has the potential to bring about policy change at Government level.

I note that the recommendations set out in the report are aimed at Government, however, I have asked officers to undertake a detailed review of the report and its findings. I have also asked for advice on any additional action that we can consider beyond those initiatives that we have already identified in our Strategic Equality Plan and associated policies. I look forward to having further discussion with members once that advice is to hand.

I note that Cllr Grimshaw’s question draws attention to the scoring that researchers have applied across all areas in the UK and the relative position of NPT in that index. Having read the report, I can see that whilst the researchers have attempted to identify those areas where women and young people may face the greatest challenges, the report urges caution in using the results for individual areas. I quote:

‘The goal is not to single out individual local authorities, but to show the scale of structural challenges faced both by girls and young women as they navigate through life, and also the difficulties facing local leaders in delivering services to communities in need of support. Each local authority will be facing different, and sometimes more extreme, challenges in terms of delivering services. Communities with greater needs for services, in order to give girls the best possible start in life, will inherently need to spend more in delivering public services

– but this has become increasingly challenging. We have detailed earlier in this report the pressures facing local government finance generally – councils are now dealing with a 27% real terms cut in core spending power since 2010 against a backdrop of increasing costs to delivery services and increasing demand from a growing population’

The report authors also conclude that:

‘There are challenges across the country – not one place varies outside 69.07 to 79.74 out of 100 on our Index. This shows that every community has room to improve, and robust support and investment from central governments is necessary to improve the lives of girls and young women in the UK.’

That advice is clearly very important in ensuring that the report findings are used in a constructive and productive manner and not used inappropriately. I am sure you will agree with that.

Whilst waiting for the analysis I have commissioned to be available, I would like to take the opportunity today to underline our ongoing commitment to addressing gender inequality. It must be of concern to all of us that despite a range of policy initiatives over an extended period of time, women and girls from all backgrounds across the United Kingdom continue to experience significant challenges and inequality.

Of course, NPT Council has been working hard to address inequality since its inception - an issue which has been supported across all political groups. I pay tribute to those cabinet members that have come before me who have championed equality of opportunity for everyone. I am committed to continuing to build on their achievements so we can make further progress.

Just as a brief reminder to members of council of some of the important work in progress:

The Cabinet continues to meet with the Youth Council to hear directly from young people and we have been very pleased to support our current youth mayor in her work to champion better sexual health and relationship service for young people;

We continue to give priority to ensuring all children and young people are aware of their rights and are confident to exercise those rights. We are particularly proud of the work undertaken by our Youth Service who have been externally recognised for the significant

difference they are making with young people, particularly those facing the greatest disadvantage and the work done through the HOPE project by Children's Social Services;

The Council continues to provide leadership across local partnership agencies to reduce violence against women and girls, sexual abuse and domestic violence and has protected the budgets that enable this important work to take place;

As an employer, we have made very good progress in addressing equal pay. Chwarae Teg formally recognised the work done by the Council to support women experiencing the menopause and to enable women on lower pay to progress within our organisation; women are better represented at senior level across the organisation now, which includes the appointment of the current chief executive Mrs Karen Jones to the most senior professional role in the Council;

These are a just few of the changes we have introduced that are making a difference. Details of the wider work being delivered across the Council will be provided in the fuller update report that I referenced earlier in my response.

Mr Mayor, this is my initial response to the question posed by Cllr Grimshaw this afternoon. Clearly, the approval of the Council's Equality Policy and Plan is the responsibility of the whole Council so I look forward to continuing the dialogue on this important issues once the analysis I have commissioned is available.

Cllr Sian Harris also explained the purpose of the HOPE charity.

Cllr Grimshaw highlighted the data in the report in relation to Neath Port Talbot and that it needs a whole system approach when decisions are being taken.

Question 2:

Cllr Rob Jones asked the following:

This council resolved over two years ago to bring Celtic Leisure in house. Can the Cabinet Member for leisure report to council on the progress made by the Coalition to fulfil that decision and bring it back in house”?

The Cabinet Member for Nature, Tourism and Wellbeing responded

The future of the Indoor Leisure contract, currently with Celtic Leisure, is something that has been under careful consideration since the decision to insource was made, and Members will be aware that the arrangements in terms of Celtic Leisure in respect of financial year 2024/25 were incorporated into the Council budget setting process, which was communicated and properly scrutinised.

In preparation for insourcing, as previously intended in April 2023 and April 2024, officers from departments across the Council together with senior Celtic Leisure staff have worked closely to make the preparations necessary for such a change.

In doing so they have been monitoring and regularly updating the costs of insourcing, and whilst there are positives to insourcing, the substantial additional costs of circa £1.4m a year is certainly not one of them.

As members will know the council has been having to make some difficult decisions as we see the government settlement flatline and inflation surging over the past couple of years. As adding an extra £1.4m pressure to those cuts was not very desirable, we have been working with the Trade Unions to identify the best possible way forward.

Council officers have worked closely with the Celtic Leisure board to improve the quality of strategic leadership within the company, which has resulted this year in a £460k reduction in the management fee, achieved through boosting income, which was very helpful in helping to reduce the level of cuts needed across the rest of the Council services.

The Celtic Leisure contract expires at the end of March 2025, so a final decision will now have to be made soon, and you will note there is an item on the forward plan for October, where we will be bringing forward a report on the options now available.

Cllr Jones followed up by referring to the £1.3m budget pressure that exists from bringing Celtic Leisure in house. He asked for the Cabinet Member to give an undertaking to deliver on the promise to safeguard leisure provision.

Cllr Cen Phillips stated that no decision has been taken and discussions with the Celtic Board, Trade Unions and staff are ongoing to review all options. An evidence based decision will be taken, prioritising the protection of jobs and services

15. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON