

**Social Services, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Committee
(Special Budget)**

**(MULTI-LOCATION MEETING - COUNCIL CHAMBER, PORT TALBOT
& MICROSOFT TEAMS)**

Members Present:

14 January 2025

Chairperson: Councillor C.Galsworthy

Vice Chairperson: Councillor H.C.Clarke

Councillors: H.Davies, O.S.Davies, S.E.Freeguard, J.Jones,
A.Lodwig, P.D.Richards and D.Whitelock

Officers In Attendance C.Howard, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas, K.Warren,
A.Bradshaw, S.Bradshaw, L. Morris, H.Jones,
G. Powell, H.Short, B. McGillian, S.Jones and
P.Chivers

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors A.Llewelyn, S.Harris, J.Hale,
S.K.Hunt, J.Hurley, S.A.Knoyle and C.Phillips

Observers Councillor Sarah Thomas

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **Budget 2025/2026**

The Chair advised members that the budget savings proposals that fell under the remit of the committee would be scrutinised; comments from the meeting would form part of the formal budget consultation response. Members were encouraged to put forward alternative

proposals which would be considered following the end of the consultation period.

The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing, advised members that it had been difficult to identify the proposed savings, due to the amount of savings required in previous years, and the challenges of additional and increasingly complex demands on services. The required savings amounted to £5.4m, and it was not possible to remove this amount from the budget, without having an impact on services. It was important that members understood the impacts of making these savings. The Director advised members that there was no real opportunity to reduce costs by negotiating with residential and domiciliary care providers. Any reduction in staffing, needed to be carefully considered; reducing staff will present risks. Therefore, any proposals around staff reduction would be small scale due to the high risks involved. The early intervention and prevention work needed to be maintained to identify emerging needs.

Each Head of Service outlined the savings and income generation proposals, under each budget line of the report in the agenda pack:

Reference SSH&CS-A: The Head of Housing and Communities advised members that there were a number of proposals that focused on improving services for those that require homelessness support from the council. Full detail of the proposals are not included in the report as the proposals are yet to go through the official decision making process. Confidence is held that the required 5% saving target is achievable, but concern is held over the additional cost of meeting the rising demand for temporary accommodation. It is disappointing the number of households in temporary accommodation has increased from around 200 to 250 households, despite the work of the homelessness team to prevent over 70% of the people who contact the service from becoming homeless. Due to a lack of temporary accommodation options, there is an increased usage of bed and breakfast accommodation at an increased cost to the authority (£3.6m in this financial year). It was noted that there is no additional funding to meet the rising demand and costs. The Head of Service confirmed that families are only housed in bed and breakfast accommodation on a short term basis, whilst more appropriate temporary accommodation is identified. The average number of days that a family stays in temporary accommodation has reduced from 128 days in 2023/24 to 84 days. A challenge faced by the service is the number of single people in temporary accommodation which accounts for 80% of all homeless households.

Over the last eighteen months, 21 households were in accommodation for over twelve months and 225 households were in temporary accommodation for between nine and twelve months.

Members asked for further clarification regarding the amount of housing units that local authorities are allowed to hold, as this can be a barrier.

The Head of Service confirmed that as a non-stock holding authority, there is a limit to fifty units (fifty bed spaces) of accommodation that can be owned and operated, without opening the housing revenue account. The authority does not have the ability to purchase houses or to operate council owned new temporary accommodation units. Where the council does not own accommodation, there is a limit to £80 housing benefit for that household. However, if the authority owned temporary accommodation, the full amount of housing benefit could be retained. The authority leases approximately ninety-three units of temporary accommodation, that, if owned would generate income and offset costs.

SSH&CS-B The Head of Childrens Services acknowledged the tough times facing the council but had the benefit of an experienced workforce with safeguarding backgrounds. There was also experience and expertise within the Finance team.

The Head of Service advised members that the proposal to save £232k related to the natural reduction in the number of non-looked after children. The non-looked after children would have been formally looked after and through the court process, they have become subject to special guardianship orders, residence orders or adoption allowances. The children would either come to an end because they have turned eighteen, or because the level of support has changed following a social work assessment. There is a risk that special guardianship orders and adoption orders could increase, leaving less available money. However, over several years, there has been a reduction in the number of children that are permanently removed from their families.

Officers confirmed that a contingency was built in to the budget, in case of new orders throughout the year.

SSH&CS-C The Head of Children and Young People Services advised members that a review of support workers within the Family Support Service had been undertaken. The proposal was for a more

flexible, responsive workforce, with lower grade support staff who can provide practical support outside of traditional office hours. Confidence was held that there would be no compulsory redundancies; some staff members had expressed an interest in voluntary redundancy.

Members asked for more information on the negative impacts of the proposal, is it considered a high risk strategy for the staff and for child protection? Is there anticipated to be any problems in relation to recruitment to the lower grade positions.

The Head of Service confirmed that any re-structure proposal can lead to negative impacts on staff. There is a need for clear communications with staff and a timely response to any concerns raised.

Officers confirmed that there were a number of vacancies within the service, which would be managed by the service going forward.

The Head of Service confirmed that historically, there had been a high demand for this type of role and there were no recruitment concerns. The Senior Management Team are experienced in talent spotting, members of staff are supported in relation to succession planning for the social workforce.

Members questioned whether there would be any child protection risks in relation to employing a less experienced workforce.

The Head of Service confirmed this was not a concern due to the amount of support provided to new staff members; less experienced staff would not visit families alone. An induction would be provided, and new staff would work alongside more experienced colleagues.

Members commented that presumptions have been made on the numbers of looked after children reducing. Members questioned whether risks had been considered in relation to the present climate in Neath Port Talbot, with the potential for the rise in mental health and unemployment following job losses at Tata Steel.

The Director of Social Services Health and Housing stated that the work of the transformation programmes was to ensure that children can stay safely, within their own homes. Any response would be appropriate to individual children's needs with safeguarding a priority. Confidence is held that there is a range of service provision across

the council and the third sector, to support families across the borough. Any staffing reductions will not impact on assessments of the most vulnerable families. The Director acknowledged risks in losing Social Workers and Social Work Managers if the staff reduction exercise was not managed correctly.

The Head of Service commented that the workforce relationship was of the utmost importance. The Head of Service shared the members concerns in relation to the pressures faced by families. It was noted that there has been an increase in the number of families who are in need, with more families in poverty which impacts on children's mental health. Work needs to be undertaken alongside partners to ensure that there are strong arrangements in place to identify and support families. The numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children has risen, these young people are vulnerable; good support arrangements are in place locally and across the region.

Members commented that there has been significant investment in Childrens Services since 2012 but there is currently a different funding position, which needed to be taken into account when considering the budget.

Members raised concern regarding the budget position and asked whether the proposal would have any impact on child protection? What impact would voluntary redundancies have on families in the borough. Is there any more information on the types of roles that have an interest in voluntary redundancy.

The Head of Service advised members that there would be a positive impact on child protection. An improvement in the staffing structure with a more responsive and flexible workforce will enable relationships to be developed with more challenging families. By sharing information and creating conditions at all levels within the service, the safer children will be, within their own homes. It was acknowledged that it is not safe for all young people to stay at home, but strong relationships between staff and families can help to build up relationships with extended family.

Members questioned if the proposal was to increase staffing in certain roles and whether the voluntary redundancies will impact on that?

The Head of Service confirmed that there would be an increase in certain roles and the voluntary redundancies in other areas would enable this to happen

Members questioned approximately how many voluntary redundancies were being considered and what impact would they have on the service.

The Head of Service confirmed that there would be a minimal number of voluntary redundancies; the roles would not be filled. As there is a top heavy amount of decision making staff, the change would not lead to any undue pressure on the workforce or lead to unsafe or poor decision making.

Members questioned whether there would be an increase of online meetings as a result of the new staffing structure.

The Head of Service confirmed that going forward there would be an increase in face to face meetings, but online meetings would be held as appropriate. It was noted that there are some benefits to online meetings; some teenagers prefer to talk to workers online.

Participation and Engagement Officers have been working with families, to provide feedback on peoples experience of dealing with the service.

SSH&CS-D The Head of Children and Young People Services confirmed that the number of children in foster care had reduced due to the quality of social work practice.

Officers confirmed that historically the in house allowances had been offset against residential overspends. There is a risk in this going forward as residential is a volatile area in terms of costings and the complexities of the young people placed. It is hoped that the transformation agenda with Foster Plus, would have a positive impact on the budget and more importantly on the young person being placed. There is a contingency built in, in terms of the in house allowances and external fostering allowances.

The Head of Service confirmed that there were risks to this proposal, but safeguarding was a priority, and children would be taken into care when necessary.

SSH&CS-E The Head of Children and Young People Services, informed members that the proposal was for income generation. There is a provision across Wales where unused foster placements

can be offered at a cost to neighbouring authorities. The scheme supports need across other authorities and allows foster carers to care for children. Officers confirmed that the income generated for next year is around £52K but the amount is dependent on the amount and length of placements.

SSH&CS-F The Head of Children and Young People Services confirmed that the proposed saving related to a jointly funded health visitor post.

SSH&CS-G The Head of Children and Young People Services, informed members that the discretionary spend budget was allocated to teams and was used to support families in crisis.

SSH&CS-H The Head of Children and Young People Services, advised members that through joint working across the council the cost of looked after children taxi routes was reduced.

SSH&CS-I The Head of Adult Services advised members that a report had already been presented to Cabinet in relation to bringing payroll services back in house. The Service is currently undertaking a reassessment of all existing Direct Payment packages which will be concluded shortly and reported to members in due course. The system has been adjusted to prevent large amounts of money accruing in bank accounts; if after eight weeks, a personal assistant has not been recruited then the money will be stopped until the recruitment takes place.

Officers outlined the main risk to the proposal; it may be perceived as a reduction in service. An exercise was undertaken last year to claw back money.

Members mentioned the pressures in the community and more people may need a personal assistant; will this proposal have any impacts.

The Head of Service clarified that the proposal would not have an impact in this regard. There are difficulties in recruiting personal assistants and domiciliary care workers. There are opportunities for the council, using transformation to build a workforce around this.

SSH&CS- J The Head of Adult Services advised members that a Transformation Team was created in 2023/24 to look specifically at young people transitioning to adulthood, and adults who were placed

in high cost residential care out of county. A business case has been completed to develop in house accommodation utilising council owned land; individuals have been identified, and this is not expected to be delivered before 2026/27. In 2025/2026, work is being undertaken with Registered Social Landlords to develop a number of extra care supported living schemes. It is hoped that an additional twenty units will be available this year to enable people to move out of high cost residential care.

A review is being undertaken for all transport and taxi costs.

To avoid the use of high cost residential care and to prevent family breakdown, there are plans to provide additional short term beds in Trem Y Mor.

A review is being undertaken of all day service provision. The proposal is to extend and convert existing council owned accommodation to provide additional in-house day services, with extended operating days and hours.

Officers outlined the risks behind the proposals, there were risks in delivering projects within timescales and public perception that services are being changed or removed. The proposals will require invest to save investment; over time there will be more control over services and ensuring they are appropriate and meeting peoples needs.

The Director of Finance advised members that transformation projects are time sensitive; it may not be possible to deliver the whole £2m transformation saving in the next financial year. The savings target had been left in the budget proposals and any timing flows would be managed by the use of reserves.

Members were in support of the proposals to bring services back in house and acknowledged the challenges of achieving a £2m saving. It was important that there was a whole council approach to achieve the savings in a timely manner.

The Head of Service agreed that £2m was a great sum of money but that the proposal was achievable. Context was given; the authority pay for residential accommodation costing over £100k a year for 120 people and accommodation costing between £50k-£100k for 220 adults. The average cost of an adult placement is £5k per week.

SSH&CS-L The Head of Adult Services advised members that there are currently 32 supported living schemes, some of which are run by the same providers and in close proximity to each other. Opportunities to share some care safely, are being explored

The Head of Service advised members that £1.2m is spent on sleep-ins, with the use of assistive technology and utilising false response schemes, there are opportunities to reduce this cost. By challenging providers, £750k in fees for unnecessary services has been clawed back.

Officers confirmed that the biggest risk around making any changes is public perception that services are being removed. Officers acknowledged that funds had been clawed back from the outcome focus reviews and work is ongoing around mechanisms to tighten up review processes going forward. A proposal to link up supported living schemes would create efficiencies in relation to night time support; however, support would be appropriate to individual circumstances. A barrier may be experienced from providers as there will be an expectation of them working together. There are barriers around fire safety, there is no legislation but current guidance is preventing the progress of this plan at present; a task group has been established to try and overcome difficulties.

Members referenced the mention in the report of 'service users willingness to accept models of care'. It was noted that there were people being looked after in their own homes who would be better placed being cared for in a nursing home and the lack of suitable care home provision.

The Head of Service responded that the text referred to people in supported living accommodation, who would be better cared for in residential care. Providers have increased staffing ratios due to difficulties of managing people's needs in their current supported living accommodation. Officers are working with care homes but there is a perception from care homes that they are unable to manage the needs of people with learning disabilities.

Members asked for clarification on the position relating to care home provision within the community.

The Head of Service confirmed that the provision is nearly at saturation point but there are ongoing conversations with providers around this.

SSH&CS-M The Head of Adult Services outlined the proposal to save £500k against domiciliary care calls. Currently 2240 double handed calls are provided four times a day at a cost of £2.7m. Following reviews from Occupational Therapists, by utilising the right equipment and training, some calls could be reduced to single handed calls, which was a better outcome for individuals.

Officers advised there was a risk that providers would be reluctant to accept new working practices and that there would be a public perception that this was a cut to services or anxiety around any new working practice.

Members enquired if any of the adaptations would have an impact on Disabled Facilities Grants

The Head of Service confirmed that this is separate to Disabled Facilities Grants.

Members asked what barriers the providers would have, is lone working a concern for them?

Officers advised members that there were logistic considerations for the providers and also that a single handed call may place more demand on staff, however advances in techniques and equipment could allow a call to be undertaken single handedly. Officers confirmed that some calls would still be double handed for health and safety reasons, and this would not change.

The Head of Service informed members that single handed calls are already in place for in-house domiciliary care on hospital discharge, this training needs to be transferred to external providers.

Members enquired if there had been any issues since single-handed calls were introduced and the Head of Service confirmed there had been no issues.

SSH&CS- O The Head of Adult Services provided members with an overview of the savings proposal in relation to the Trem Y Glyn Reablement capacity. From 1st April 2025, the facility will come back into the council and will be run by Social Services. Initially there are four available reablement beds. The savings are based on twelve beds, but residents of Trem Y Glyn have been assured that people will not be moved unnecessarily. The saving could be achieved by

delaying people going into residential care too soon by providing reablement and right sized care packages.

Members asked whether recruitment at Trem Y Glyn was an issue and the Head of Service confirmed that Trem Y Glyn was fully staffed.

Officers confirmed that no person would be moved. The reablement beds would not be within a set unit initially which will provide difficulties for staff in providing two models of care. There may be delays in providing domiciliary care packages when people leave the home, resulting in people staying longer in the reablement bed than necessary.

The Head of Service confirmed that a social worker would be placed in the reablement unit to enable early discussions to be held with families in relation to moving from the unit so beds are available when needed.

SSH&CS-P The Head of Adult Services advised members that the savings related to a review of adult services structure and a reduction of posts where appropriate. This proposal is a last resort and will only be considered if the savings cannot be made elsewhere or where it is appropriate to do so. This proposal could affect staff morale. There may be a need to remodel some of the services due to the vacancy factor of £1.3m that has to be identified next year, this is challenging with the current budget available. The budget proposals take into account the current position but do not take into account any additional demand from an ageing population and an increase in the presentation of people with learning disabilities and mental health issues; partners are facing challenges and have changed their working practices which affects how adult social care is delivered.

The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing thanked officers for their input and for the interest and questions from the committee. The Director praised his management team for their optimism, but expressed his concern at taking £5.5m from the budget at a time of excess demand on services. The committee will be informed in more detail of proposals as they are developed.

The Cabinet member for Housing and Community Safety thanked the scrutiny committee for their comments. Officers have set out how serious the current financial position is, and the risks involved to the proposals, as well as the safeguards that need to be in place to

ensure the well-being of service users and staff members. The proposals outline transformational changes that will protect and improve many services, bringing services back in house where possible and appropriate. Thanks were given to colleagues and senior officers for supporting the required investment to achieve the strategies. Members were encouraged to continue contributing to the budget consultation and encourage their residents to participate. Members were asked to continue to lobby the Welsh Government in relation to an improved local government settlement.

The report is for consultation purposes.

Following scrutiny, the committee noted the report

4. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

**Cllr. C Galsworthy
CHAIRPERSON**