

REGENERATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(Committee Rooms 1/2 - Port Talbot Civic Centre)

Members Present:

27 November 2017

Chairperson: Councillor S.K.Hunt

Vice Chairperson: Councillor L.Jones

Councillors: C.J.Jones, S.Purse, S.Rahaman,
A.J.Richards, R.L.Taylor, O.S.Davies and
R.W.Wood

Officers In Attendance S.Brennan, Mrs.N.Pearce and Miss.C.Davies

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors D.W.Davies and A.Wingrave

1. **TO SCRUTINISE INFORMATION AND MONITORING ISSUES BEING REPORTED BY:**

- (a) Consultation on Environment Directorate's Budget And Draft Savings For 2018/19

Officers provided Members with the context for the Environment Directorate's draft budget proposals. Officers reported that the provisional Local Government settlement for 2018/19 for the authority was £20m less than the previous year. Officers stated that the Environment Directorate's budget was £32.710m at present and was currently 11.9% of the local authority's overall budget. Officers continued by stating that since 2009/10 the Directorate had contributed £18m towards the authority's deficit and was expected to contribute an additional £2m in the current financial year. Officers added that over 400 members of staff had left the Directorate within the last seven years, with 200 leaving under the Early Retirement/Voluntary Redundancy (ER/VR) scheme during financial years 2013/14 and 2014/15.

Officers referred to proposal ENV706 regarding the generation of income through asset sponsorship. Officers informed Members that the additional £75k target identified in the current Financial Forward Plan had been deferred, but was likely to be achieved during the next financial year now that the contract with Immediate Solutions had been extended.

Officers elaborated on proposal ENV804 regarding staff redundancies and the deletion of posts across the directorate. Officers stated that these savings would be achieved by considering ER/VR applications and by utilising existing staff in different ways.

Officers updated Members on proposal ENV805 regarding the reduction of staff within the Planning Department. Officers reported that a couple of enquiries had been received from staff with regard to the ER/VR scheme. Officers continued by stating that losing experienced staff through the ER/VR scheme would put pressure on the service area, and a re-structure may help to alleviate the problem.

Officers referred to proposal ENV806 regarding the increase to the rent for workshops, industrial units and business centres. Officers acknowledged that some businesses may already be facing financial difficulty and a rent increase may affect some businesses more than others. Officers assured Members that the authority would try to work with businesses where possible. Officers continued by stating that due to the financial pressures placed on the authority a slight rent increase was necessary.

Officers conceded that the list of proposals brought forward for the next financial year were not as extensive as in previous years as it was becoming increasingly difficult each year to identify savings. Despite this, officers informed Members that other items and proposals would be brought to future scrutiny committee meetings such as the cleaning review, public conveniences review and a joint review with the Social Services Health and Housing Directorate to look at aspects of commissioning.

Members queried how much interest had been expressed so far in relation to asset sponsorship (proposal ENV706). Officers informed Members that the authority worked with an external provider called Immediate Solutions in order to attract businesses who would be interested in asset sponsorship. Officers continued by stating that Immediate Solutions received a percentage fee for every sponsorship deal that they gained for the authority. Officers conceded that

sponsorship had tailed off towards the end of this year. Officers explained that the company received a fixed financial penalty fee if they were not actively marketing for sponsorship for the authority. Officers stated that as part of the new extended contract the authority received a more lucrative fixed rate for each sponsorship deal. Officers confirmed that sponsorship opportunities were offered to businesses for assets such as signs on roundabouts, signs when entering villages and towns, and signs on lighting columns. Officers stated that it was important not to provide too much visual clutter in any one place, particularly for motorists where they could be distracted from the road. Officers added that advertising on bridges was not offered to businesses as citizens regularly covered bridges with bed sheets for various occasions, and there were also concerns that banners could fall onto cars passing beneath which could cause an accident.

Members enquired as to how businesses were able to apply to the authority to sponsor an asset. Officers informed Members that businesses could contact the authority directly to apply. Officers stated that the Economic Development Department provided a price list for all the different assets within the borough and would then put businesses in touch with Immediate Solutions who would offer them a sponsorship opportunity based on their budget. Officers continued by explaining that assets were priced based on how busy a particular area was and the footfall.

Members queried how many staff were likely to be made redundant or have their posts deleted in relation to proposal ENV804. Officers confirmed that it was likely that the directorate would lose more than one member of staff as previously indicated in order to meet the £30k target. Officers continued by stating that they were unable to lose more than one post within the Planning Department due to large developments anticipated in the near future.

Members questioned in relation to proposal ENV805 whether job sharing would be an option within the Planning Department to assist with pressures. Officers stated that job sharing and part-time working did not suit the requirements of the service. Officers added that a re-structure within the service would be the preferred approach to fill a post that was lost through ER/VR. Members referred to previous items brought before the committee where planning application targets had been exceeded, and questioned whether the loss of a senior member of staff could detrimentally affect the service. Officers

responded by stating that the service could sustain the loss of one experienced member of staff, but any more would disrupt the service.

Members queried in relation to proposal ENV806 whether businesses making large profits should be charged more for rent. Members continued by questioning whether the authority could view the accounts of businesses occupying workshops, industrial units and business centres across the authority and set the rent based on their profits. Members raised concerns over the potential difficulty that some businesses could experience as a result of a rent increase, while there were other businesses that were thriving and capable of paying a higher rate of rent.

Officers stated that the process for charging for rentals had been reviewed and agreed over three years ago. Officers explained that the authority did not have the capacity to view the accounts of businesses. Officers continued by stating that the authority tried to keep rent at a fair and standard rate where possible. Officers added that the authority worked closely with businesses that were facing financial difficulty and would always look at a business' long term prospects. Officers commented that when businesses were unable to pay the rent it usually indicated that there was a far more significant underlying issue with the business, as the rent was only a small part of the business' outgoing costs.

Members enquired whether there was a waiting list for workshops, industrial units and business centres. Officers confirmed that there was a waiting list. Officers stated that the Business Development Team provided assistance in filling the units. Officers explained that they were keen to accommodate business where possible due to the contribution that businesses make to the local economy.

CHAIRPERSON