

**Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny
Committee**

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

Members Present:

10 January 2024

Chairperson: Councillor S.Pursey

Vice Chairperson: Councillor T.Bowen

Councillors: C.James, L.Williams, W.Carpenter, A.Dacey,
R.Davies, S.Thomas and R.W.Wood

Officers In Attendance D.Griffiths, C.Morris, N.Pearce, C.Plowman,
M.Roberts, T.Rees and H.Jones

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

Observers Councillor Angharad Rebecca Aubrey
Councillor Suzanne Paddison

1. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. The Chair informed members of the passing of Councillor Sheila Penry who was a member of this committee and a former chair of the Streetscene Committee.

Members observed a minute's silence as a mark of respect. The chair advised that members would have an opportunity to pay tribute to Cllr Penry at the next full Council meeting.

The chair advised that in relation to item 3, that officers have advised that items listed as a ENV 21, 22 and 23 will be considered under the Education, Skills, and Wellbeing Scrutiny committee.

2. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Tim Bowen indicated he had a personal interest for Appendix 4, Reference ENV7, as his wife works for Gnoll Country Park.

3. **Budget consultation 2024/25**

Members considered the Budget Consultation Report 2024/25 as presented.

The Chair outlined that comments from the meeting will form part of the formal consultation response to the budget. Members were reminded of their obligation as part of the budget consultation process to put forward any other proposals for budget savings which are not included within the report so that officers can give them consideration as soon as possible.

Members were reminded that they should consider the elements of the budget which fall under the remit of this scrutiny committee.

Nicola Pearce, Director of Environment gave a brief overview of the general proposals as listed in the Budget Consultation Report 2024/25 and explained the difficult situation the directorate faces in relation to achieving a balanced budget.

Members were advised that officers have tried to drive down costs and secure with savings first and then for those that aren't covered under those strategic savings proposals, Officers would go through each of the proposals line by line as identified in Appendix 4.

ENV1

Members asked if the authority is engaging with planning officers to identify opportunities to increase value by selling authority buildings and land with planning permission.

Officers advised that if the land or buildings have got planning permission for alternative use, then it will inflate the price that the authority can secure for that asset. That is something officers will always do, but there are constraints associated with some buildings, such as being on a floodplain.

Officers noted that members have referred to Community Adaptation and Resilience Plans (CARPs) in a question submitted before the meeting to officers in relation to this. Members were advised that

CARPs don't allow you to just do what you want to just because you've got the opportunity to do those. Officers would still need to mitigate the impact of flooding, and there will still be uses that you cannot put in a floodplain even if you've got a CARP in place. Officers advised that when they are ready to release a building or land, they will establish what the best use is for that site and what they can get planning permission for which will provide the best support for the Community and for the economy and possibly for the councils housing requirements and for the budget.

These will be considered to make the right decision for the Council at that time based on those issues.

ENV4

Members asked about the £185,000 saving that's listed for the next financial year on the operating subsidy, members asked what other elements make up the saving other than security or income for the next financial year?

Officers explained that there are high insurance and security costs there, with security guards making up the most of it. This is down to the threats that have happened there including a security guard being threatened with a machete which meant that the security guards would only work in pairs for safety.

ENV8

Officers were asked who they were consulting with in relation to public safety and if they had spoken to the police and Thrive? Members expressed their primary concern with the policy was the safety of young women and girls in the community.

Officers advised that the Council manager for the lighting service has met with the police and members of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and that work is continuing as part of the consultations and that the CSP is pulling together a coordinated reply for the police and other partners who were involved in that. This will come forward as part of the consultation responses in the report on the outcome of the consultation.

Members asked if the Council had been forced to switch off lights and dimming lights in the past, and what were the results of the dimming and the switching off at that time?

Members were advised that in the past, there have been discussions about this as the authority has had energy issues previously, but it's not been formally considered before in terms of switching lights off.

Officers explained that the authority have invested a lot in energy saving work including changing the switch gear, changing the types of lamps, putting in LEDs and putting in central control systems. Officers referenced the report that came to the committee as part of going to consultation, that the electricity bill would have been £700,000 at the high end if the work hadn't been done.

Officers explained that they have exhausted that work and there's a lot of lamps already dimmed and some double dimmed. This is why officers are now talking about dimming the remaining high energy lights. The LED lights are now being put in under previous savings and officers are trying to get more savings out of previous improvements.

Members asked if this is a trial, or will this be the baseline position going forward and asked if it was decided to reinstate the light dimming to pre-2024/25 levels would the authority be looking to find an additional £300,000 in the 25/26 budget?

Officers advised that their understanding is that it will be a baseline adjustment. They also advised that if the lights were dimmed or switched off part-night, then there was a subsequent reversal of that decision, there would be a budget pressure associated with that because they'd been a baseline adjustment.

Members noted that there had been a lot of investment in the street lighting estate over the years but asked if other business cases are being drawn up to invest in LED's which would allow officers to make savings without having an impact on residents as previous reports indicated there were still a significant number of fluorescent lamps that couldn't be dimmed further.

Officers explained that there are Salix interest free loans available to the Council and officers have submitted business cases and been successful. This had led to the replacement of all the lights where there is a business case that meets the requirement for that funding.

Members were advised that the fluorescent lights that were put in as part of the large-scale renewal are not that energy hungry and the

actual benefit of changing to LED's is quite marginal in terms of energy. Officers explained that manufacturers are starting to stop making the fluorescent lamps, so the authority has got a rolling program to replace those fluorescent lamps and cannibalise the ones they replace to use those for parts for other ones.

The fluorescents will get changed over time, but there isn't a business case to apply for the money to change those because the energy savings just aren't there.

Members wanted to clarify if the large-scale replacement of the fluorescent lamps with LEDs in the Sandfields area was done outside of the Salix program or out of the authorities' own investment or if the business case had changed in the meantime?

Officers advised that it may have been done as part of the authority's own renewal program, but they would need to check. [Confirmed as done as part of SALIX work]

Members enquired how much investigation into the safety of vehicles on roads where light dimming has happened and asked officers were getting the safety information from.

Officers explained that they employed a consultant in coming up with the original proposals and following on from the scrutiny committee meeting, the consultant's report was sent to all the committee members. The report sets out all the different aspects that were considered in coming up with the proposals.

Members were advised that officers are consulting with the police and the CSP because the police are experts in this area. Members were informed that every time there is a fatality, officers get a full report from the police setting out their analysis of the situation and what the contributory factors were.

Members commented that there are a variety of reports online about dimming of lights and there are arguments for both views, with most saying there isn't much effect on crime or anti-social behaviour. Members wanted to ask whether it was best to review the decision if there is a rise in anti-social behaviour. Or to review the decision after a period of time?

Officers advised that a lot of the lights are already dimmed, and they have been for a long time. Officers felt it would be sensible to keep

things under review and to weigh up all the consultation responses that come in and have a review at some point afterwards.

ENV9

Members wanted to clarify if this saving is not dependent on any increase in recycling rates or any changes to behaviour from residents and is purely a return on investment that's been made by the Council.

Officers advised that the £400,000 is being achieved now and it's associated with the sorting equipment that's been put in. As an aside, the council has the waste strategy where they are trying to grow the amount of recycling and where they do that, officers are looking at reinvesting money into expanding recycling.

Members highlighted to officers that there had been discussion online about changes to a 3 weekly bin collection, which is mentioned in appendix 5 as a suggestion. Members asked if the £400,000 was dependent on changes like that and changes to recycling rates.

Officers explained that it's not the case and that the saving identified in Item ENV 9 is because of the improved sorting that the council is now able to do because there isn't a contamination of different materials in one batch. Officers can now secure a better price for that recycling which is helping the authority to achieve the £400,000 additional income.

Members were advised that the waste strategy currently being pursued, has got several recommendations aimed at pushing up recycling so the authority can achieve the 70% Welsh Government target by 2024/25. If the authority can't achieve that target, then it is potentially exposed to financial penalties which means there is a requirement to do everything possible to achieve that target.

Officers explained that the indirect impact to the savings target is if the council has more recycling which they can sell onto different markets, then it will mean an increased income over and above the current levels of recycling that the authority is processing through the transfer station.

There will be an indirect impact, but the direct impact which is leading to that £400,000 saving is associated with the improved sorting equipment.

ENV9

The Cabinet member for Streetscene asked officers to give assurances to members that any such proposals on three weekly collections isn't directly part of the current budget consultation and any such proposals will be considered by this committee and the Cabinet Board further down the line.

The Chair also asked the Cabinet member or the officers to clarify that the current waste strategy does state that the authority will be consulting on three weekly collections in this current financial year with an implementation date of next year.

Officers advised that there is due to come an update report on the whole of the waste strategy, action plan delivery and all the detailed work has been completed to identify what the three weekly collections would look like in terms of rounds and the important details for the internal side of the consultation with trade union colleagues.

Officers also explained that they would have to look at exactly when they can consult but they are intending to still do the consultation. Officers confirmed that reducing the frequency of the residual waste does not form part of the budget proposals or the budget consultation, but it is part of the agreed waste strategy that they have looked at to be implemented, if necessary, to achieve the 70% recycling target and to avoid fines and reputational damage that goes with that.

Officers advised that they need to start that consultation as soon as possible because there is a feed in time to go through the processes of getting all the information together and being ready to do it and to report back to committee. This is why officers have had to start it so they can complete the consultation and then if the authority needed to move to three weekly collections, they could do that but that would all be subject to future decisions.

Officers acknowledged that everyone would be closely following the performance figures, and that everyone was doing their best to get those up along with the other elements of the action plan. If everyone can work together with the public the authority can get to 70% and that takes the pressure off making changes.

The Chair clarified if the plan is still to go ahead with the consultation this financial year as included in the waste strategy, but any positive

financial impacts, if that was progressed in the next financial year, haven't been included in the budget meaning any increases in recycling that might result of that haven't been built into this and they would be a bonus if that did happen.

Officers clarified that any savings associated with it would be reinvested in expanded recycling services so they wouldn't be making savings by going to three weekly collections because we've been reinvesting that money and expanding and recycling services.

Officers explained that there is a potential that if the authority grew the recycling it would grow the income, but recycling rates can go up and down.

The Cabinet member thanked officers for the clarification that it doesn't form part of the current budget consultation as contrary to information that has been put out online and until such time as he and Cabinet colleagues make a decision on 3 weekly collections that decision will be left until further down the line.

ENV11

Members commented that they hoped that the £25,000 saving had been from a re training strategy because the damage that the public see being done is by the handling of the receptacles by staff. Members also wanted clarity on what the evidence of the £25,000 saving is based on.

Officers advised that the service manager has looked at this and they have statistics of how many bins they buy, how many are put out and they have got expanded information due to changes to some of the questions asked by customer services when people ring to request a new bin.

The public are asked if it is due to the behaviour by the crew. This information is being correlated to the crews that are doing the work and now officers can do re-educating and talk to the crews with the highest numbers of reports.

The service manager must make a judgment because some of these breakages are due to a type of bin that was purchased previously which have proved to not be robust and aren't used anymore, but they are still in circulation and are still working their way through the system and will prove to be more fragile. Officers stated that it is a 2-

pronged attack of getting those receptacles out of the system, but also tackling the crews that that aren't looking after the equipment as they should be.

ENV12 Termination of Neath Canal Public Access Rights Agreement on lower section & ENV13 termination of License Agreement on the upper section of the Neath Canal

The Chair raised his concern in relation to access to the towpath. He asked that given that it is currently an active travel route and that the public rights of way for walking do not give access for cycling, his concern is that if the council terminates the agreement and then seeks to negotiate something afterwards that in that interim period there may be a risk that the owner of that towpath closes access if there is no public access agreement to sections of it. Or they may take steps to stop cyclists if they're only legal requirement, is to maintain a public right of way?

The Chair also asked if given the authority had secured significant amounts of Welsh Government funding to develop the active travel route along the towpath, is the authority under any obligation to take reasonable steps to continue the license agreement?

Officers advised that the license agreement relates to the top part of the canal towards Resolven in the north of Abergarwed and what the license agreement gives over and above the public access agreement is access to the water body. Officers advised that there is an organisation there that during the summer months' rent out paddle boards and kayaks. What the authority will be doing is negotiating with St Modwen for a public access agreement in place whereby the authority will maintain as part of councils ongoing maintenance programs, the towpath only.

Officers acknowledged that it is an important part of the active travel network, but the budget gap is so significant that officers have had to look everywhere for savings. Officers said they would like to think that the owner, if presented with an opportunity for somebody else to maintain their asset which they would otherwise have to maintain themselves, they would look favourably upon that.

Officers advised that the authority cannot guarantee a positive outcome, but officers will do their best behind the scenes to secure a positive outcome because they acknowledge the importance the

canal towpath has. The proposal that they have put forward has been suggested because the budget problem is so significant.

The Chair asked to clarify that the liability concern is in relation to the license agreement that doesn't really affect access to the towpath on the active travel route. The decision on the active travel route towpath is purely a budgetary concern over the £35,000 that the authority is currently paying so that decision to cut the £35,000 is not because of the overarching liability.

Members were advised that the authority has noted that they need to trim £35,000 from the budget and this is one of the options and that they have been forced down this route because the budget problem is so hard, and savings have had to be found wherever they are even if they are small amounts.

Officers will try and mitigate that through negotiation with the landowner where they can get a public access agreement where we don't have to pay somebody else to do the work for the authority and the authority will do the work themselves.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Economic Growth commented that there are two private companies involved and one of which has large reserves and have benefited from years of industrial use of the canal from local industries but now don't want to put anything into it as a return. He felt that it should be time for them to stand up and do things as well.

ENV14

Members commented that school reserves are being wiped out and to charge the service back to them even if not a lot of money could be a huge amount for some schools that haven't got that facility.

Members asked if schools did go to a private company to get the service done cheaper, would it be up to the standard that they currently get now with the council, and would it be a risk to the grounds of the schools?

Officers advised that good accountancy practice is that the cost should go back to where they are, so that everybody knows where the spend is and what it's being spent on. Officers think that some of the schools have gone to other contractors before and they've come

back to the council because they know it provides a good service with good health and safety.

Members queried if schools do start switching to private contractors, would it become a threat to levels of employment of council grounds people due to a lack of work coming in. Officers advised that there are approximately 190 operational people in neighbourhood services and just under natural turnover they can accommodate a certain amount of change because it is an aged workforce and there are people retiring and turnover all the time, so officers wouldn't see any problem with accommodating any change if that happened.

ENV25

Members commented that there is a bridge in bad repair on a footpath that that has been reported for over a year and has not been fixed and that saving money on the budget is all very well but at some point, the authority could have liability of someone tripping and getting hurt.

Officers clarified that the countryside and access budget is about improvements to the surface of the public rights of way including vegetation cut back etc. and the question related to structures on the rights of way network and there is a separate budget line on that.

Officers are not proposing to cut that budget and the larger structures are dealt with primarily by engineering and the smaller structures are covered by the countryside and wildlife access team.

In relation to engineering, officers explained they have been doing internal reviews of service functions and the proposal from April onwards is that the inspection regime associated with bridges and structures on the public rights of way will be undertaken by the engineering team through the structures team.

There is no budget per se so they will be able to do the inspection work, but where there are structures that will fail public safety access, officers we will need to act accordingly, and then they will have to go and secure capital funding for the repairs of the larger span, more complex structures.

Officers believe they will probably be dipping into the normal revenue and capital funding that's for the bridges team to try and support that work, so they will be doing less work elsewhere across the wider

bridges' portfolio, but it's unfortunately the budgetary position that the authority finds itself in now.

Officers advised that for retaining structures on the highway network there's no specific budget for those and they dip into the structures budget to do any emergency works that are needed to keep the highways open. This is a building pressure and as they are aging structures the problem is not going to go away and it's something that officers will have to risk assess and manage.

Members asked about voluntary groups and wanted to know how the Friends of Margam Park and friends of the Gnoll, are supervised doing work and do they have people in charge of them that are watching over what they are doing? The Chair also asked if the use of volunteers may help with the situation with the rights of way.

Officers advised that in terms of the Margam Park and the Friends of Margam Park, they are contained within a park so there is a contained environment and there are significant numbers of staff working in Margam Park that have regular engagement with that group so there are constant supervision opportunities there.

The rights of way in comparison are thousands of Kilometres long and there are only two officers covering it so they don't have the team that Margam Park has or the staff size of the Gnoll. Officers advised that it may well be a proposal in terms of trying to put some community involvement scheme together in the future, but as a directorate for these assets, they haven't got that resource either in terms of staff or funding.

Appendix 5

Members were confused why the three weekly waste collections suggestion was included in Appendix 5 2023-2024 budget suggestions if it isn't a budget proposal.

Officers explained that they had received criticism from some officers and members of the public as to why proposals that they suggested previously haven't gone anywhere and officers thought it would be helpful for members to see what had happened with some of the suggestions that came forward too late to consider for 23/24 budget and to show what officers have done, which ones they were taking forward and the reasons behind the ones they are not taking forward. Officers apologised for the confusion.

Appendix 7

Members noted that there was a line around the adjusted building opening patterns of the civic centre and it stated that due to some nature of the meetings that take place later in the day, political party meetings, training and mayor mayoral appointments could be hosted elsewhere. Members wanted to know if they would be accommodated directly in that.

Officers advised Noelwyn Daniel, Corporate Director for strategy and corporate services dismissed this as being an option because those meetings need to take place in the evening.

Members asked about the reference to reconfiguration of civic buildings to reduce external room hire costs with a target of £100,000 saving in the next financial year.

Members asked for clarity on where that is sitting in the budget now because it isn't it identified in any of the individual budget lines.

Officers have identified that there may be the opportunity to move that sort of work at those sorts of meetings into the Civic Centre rather than in external room hire locations. The £100,000 isn't included as a budget saving because the facilities within the Civic Centre are not available now, so they are being remodelled on the ground floor.

No savings have been assumed because officers need to wait for the civic centre to be remodelled and they need to see whether those meetings do get moved into the civic centres as some of the things on the schedule are meetings like parent and toddler clubs they won't be going into the civic centre.

Officers will monitor the take up of that next year and if they do see a £100,000 saving, or ability to charge to grant then officers will put that into the savings schedule potentially for the following year.

There were no additional budget proposals put forward by members at the meeting. Following scrutiny, Members noted the report.

4. **Urgent Items**

There was none.

CHAIRPERSON