

**Community, Finance and Strategic Leadership Scrutiny Committee
(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft
Teams)**

Members Present:

17 October 2024

Chairperson: Councillor P.Rogers

Vice Chairperson: Councillor C.Jordan

Councillors: T.Bowen, C.Galsworthy, J.Henton, J.Jones,
S.Pursey, S.H.Reynolds, A.J.Richards, A.Dacey
and S.Thomas

**Officers In
Attendance** T.Davies, C.Griffiths, S.Rees, N.Daniel,
H.Jones, G.Powell, C.Owen and A.Thomas

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors S.K.Hunt, S.A.Knoyle and
A.Llewelyn

Observers Councillors J.Hale, N.Jenkins, S.Jones and
C.Phillips.

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **To consider items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme**

The committee considered the items selected from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme.

(a) **Budget 2025/2026**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Officers outlined the various savings and income generation proposals which fall within their remit. Members were reminded that this item is not part of the formal consultation process but is an opportunity for officers to provide an early indication on initial thoughts in relation to the budget.

The Director of Strategy and Corporate Services outlined that the directorate was considering how to streamline its processes but continue to add value to all services and other directorates. The Director confirmed that the directorate has the smallest overall budget, and 90% of this budget is attributed to staff costs. The Director outlined the number of staff currently within the directorate and indicated that there is currently consideration for a reduction of 21 posts within the directorate. There are no specific details on the reduction in posts.

The Chief Digital Officer went through the budget items assigned to him, which includes the digital teams and the CCTV across the authority. During 23/24 the service has achieved a saving of £429,000.

The mobile phone savings identified, are targeting areas of the contract where further savings can be made. It is noted that these are likely to be the last of the savings that will be able to be made from the mobile phone contracts.

Consideration has been given to support other directorates, for example, changing operating models in the environment directorate. Security arrangements at Tregellis Court have been assessed and changes have been made utilising AI and the CCTV provisions in place. This has allowed a significant savings for the Environment Directorate to be made through a reduction in physical onsite security and has also brought some extra money into the CCTV provision. This technology will also be utilised in The Quays in the next financial year.

The service remodelling identified relates to the staffing structure for the division. All staff within the service area have been written to, asking if they would consider early retirement, voluntary redundancy, reduced working hours or flexible retirement. Once received, all

expressions of interest will be reviewed on a risk-based assessment approach, to identify if any of the posts could be released and removed from the structure. It was noted that a large part of the saving has already been realised through one vacant post and two voluntary redundancies.

Members queried how large the team is currently and what is the minimum number that the team can operate at. There are currently around 90 posts within Digital Services overall. However, to assess the minimum number to operate would be difficult as it depends which function within the service is considered and the risks associated with that service area.

Members expressed their concern at staff who are potentially lone working due to the AI and CCTV provision put in place on Council premises instead of security guards. Further, the increased pressure on staff on the frontline when requests are made to the service desk and any potential effect remodelling may have on this service area. Officers advised that there have been no changes to the lone working arrangements themselves, only the way that the building is accessed. Further, any potential risks will be assessed to the service area before changes are agreed.

Members queried in terms of the remodelling of the service area, how much has been realised of the £264,000 from the vacant posts already and what is essentially left to find. Officers confirmed the amount already realised is £156,906 and outlined how this saving has been met.

Members are aware that the service is currently balancing a lot of priorities, especially as much of the work is across the Council and not directorate specific. Members queried if officers could outline what the priorities of the work area are. Officers confirmed that the Council have a very ambitious digital strategy which has a number of key transformation programmes aligned to it. Any further cuts will be assessed against the priorities that are set within the Digital Strategy and will be presented back as part of the risk analysis.

Officers went through the savings identified in d-k of the budget. The service employs 124 people and is spread across several service areas, including human resources (which includes the seconded trade union officers), the learning, training and development team, the corporate occupational health and safety and wellbeing team, the emergency planning team, the corporate strategy and performance

management team (which includes communications and marketing, customer services, the public services board, mayoral and civic admin and the executive support).

Officers confirmed that moving forward in 25/26 the budget is planned to be reduced by £225,000. In terms of the non-staffing spend, there is very little that can be done to reduce costs. Officers advised that 95% of the budget relates to staffing costs. A vacancy freeze is currently in place across the service, so that when a post becomes vacant it is not filled and consideration can be given to deleting the post.

Officers confirmed that in terms of the remodelling of the service, staff have been asked to consider voluntary redundancies, temporary reduction in hours and early retirement. Mitigation of the risks associated with any reduction in staff is being fully explored, as there are likely to be effects on front line services.

The service is the first to utilise robotics automate for items. Also, through the Future of Works Team, guidance has been produced for line managers to assist with loss of support through loss of staff. The chatbot is also going to be reintroduced.

In terms of the Emergency Planning Team and the increase in income, this relates to the Council's COMAH sites. The Council is able to reclaim costs that are spent in supporting the COMAH sites. The charges are going to be reviewed and increased to support the COMAH sites.

The Trade Union facilities budget is also proposed to be reduced.

Members queried what the temporary change to the staffing structure relates too. Officers confirmed that it is where a member of staff has flexibly retired and there is another colleague who is in training to step into their role. Whilst the structure has not permanently changed, when the person fully retires from the substantive role, the other person is likely to be in a good place to apply for the role and then the lower post could possibly be deleted.

Members were provided with an outline of the robot that is used and the tasks that it undertakes. The robot has been used since 2017 and was originally brought in to support the DBS checks that are undertaken. The robot has since been used in various other

processes. From a customer perspective there is no real change in the service, other than the processes are undertaken quicker.

Members asked for further detail to understand the budget relating to the trade unions. Officers confirmed that the budget was set at just under £200k per annum and was split between the two trade unions – GMB and Unison. The budget funds trade union duty time. As an employer the authority has an obligation to enable trade union reps to undertake trade union duties in relation to the employer. For example, supporting employees at a disciplinary hearing, management of change etc. There are two ways this is supported across the authority. There are trade union reps within services who are given reasonable time off which is supported by the services. Further, trade unions are also involved in the items requiring larger negotiations. The authority created a budget to second people nominated by the trade union branches and if the budget supports it, that person is seconded to carry out the required duties. The early proposals are looking at reducing the budget to support secondments. However, the trade unions will also need to provide feedback on this proposal.

Members queried, in general, with regards to the conversations that are taking place around voluntary redundancy etc. how are these conversations managed on a practical level if the saving requirements of the authority change. Officers confirmed that conversations that are currently taking place are in a non-committal basis. Informal consultation is currently taking place with staff and nothing will be formalised until the settlement figure is received in December.

The Cabinet Member for Finance stressed the importance of bringing forward any ideas for savings and income generation proposals at an early stage to the attention of staff, to allow for full consideration and exploration of the item.

Members expressed their concern about deleting posts and how this will affect people in the future with no jobs being available. Whilst members acknowledged the forthcoming Freeports, members were concerned that members of the public may not be aware of this and the current position of the Council. Further, members queried if the Unions had been asked to contribute towards the cost of the savings. It was confirmed that Unison already part fund the admin post that the authority fund. However, officers confirmed that they would be raising the budget with the regional officers of the unions.

Officers outlined that Legal & Democratic Services incorporates 10 teams with 90 staff members. The last couple of years have focused on income generation opportunities in order to assist with the budget.

Service remodelling relates to deleting vacant posts. This will mean that the work associated with the vacant post will be distributed across other members of staff. Officers outlined the implications of deleting vacant posts.

Members were provided with an overview on the income generation charges to specific projects. It was noted that additional persons will not be employed but the additional work pressures will be met by existing staff. The work relates to the Freeport and the Corporate Joint Committee. Officers advised that previously the income has been used to fund succession planning within the team and to also fund learning opportunities. This assists with encouraging retention of staff within the team. Moving forward, the income will be used to underpin core costs within the service area.

With regards to the mailroom, officers advised that the way in which mail is received has significantly changed over the years. Consideration is being given to change and adapt the way that the service operates. The service will be modernised which should reduce some of the costs involved.

Officers outlined the changes to the legal resources. Legal resources available to officers will be reduced. The effect of this will be a reduction in ease of access to resources, it will take longer for officers to source relevant information and a lot more cross-referencing will be required. Members queried what the overall budget for legal resources was. The current budget is set at 15-20% of the resource budget and there is consideration currently being given to losing one of the three resources currently used. Members queried if resources are being shared across other authorities. Officers confirmed that consideration was given to this, but savings are more effective when resources are obtained individually.

Members queried what has been the impacts on the new methods of working in partnership. Officers confirmed that regional working arrangements are promoted by Welsh Government. The authority needs to participate to ensure that funding is received.

Officers provided a brief overview on the finance section. It was confirmed that there are 160 members of staff in this section, and it provides both inhouse support and frontline services.

Officers confirmed that the savings in relation to premiums relates to contracts for insurance being retendered and premiums being lower. The other saving identified is around the remodelling of the services and consideration is being given to voluntary redundancy and deletion of a post where the person has retired.

Following scrutiny, members noted the report and the suggestions and views put forward by the committee.

4. **To consider items from the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme**

There were no items to consider from the scrutiny committee forward work programme.

5. **Performance Monitoring**

There were no performance monitoring items to consider.

6. **Selection of items for future scrutiny**

Members agreed to add the following item to the Forward Work Programme:

- Third Sector Grants and Commissioning Arrangements – 28th November 2024

It was confirmed that the budget scrutiny committee meeting would be taking place on Monday 13th January 2024.

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

7. **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

CHAIRPERSON