

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

(Via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

28 July 2021

Chairperson: Councillor S.Rahaman

Vice Chairperson: Councillor S.E.Freeguard

Councillors: N.T.Hunt, S.K.Hunt, D.Keogh, S.A.Knoyle, A.Llewelyn, S.Miller, R.Mizen, S.Paddison, L.M.Purcell, S.M.Penry, S.H.Reynolds, R.L.Taylor, A.N.Woolcock and W.F.Griffiths

Officers In Attendance K.Jones, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas, D.Griffiths, H.Jenkins, C.Griffiths, S.Brennan, M.Shaw, C.Davies and J.Woodman-Ralph

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors C.Clement-Williams, M.Harvey, D.Jones, E.V.Latham, A.R.Lockyer, P.A.Rees, P.D.Richards and A.Wingrave

1. Chairs Announcements

The Committee was informed of a change to the following report on the Cabinet Board Agenda:

- Agenda Item 7 – Capital Programme Monitoring Report 2021/2022 – The Reason for Decision and the Implementation of Decision had been excluded from the report.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services explained that the Reason for Decision was to ensure that the Council was compliant with the Constitution and that the budget was updated, and the Implementation of Decision would be after the three day call in period.

Following the update, Members were happy with the changes, therefore chose not to scrutinise the report.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

The following Members made a declaration of interest:

Cllr. S. Rahaman - Re. Urgent Item 12 – Proposal to provide free town centre car parking for the month of August 2021 as he owns a business within the affected areas mentioned in the report.

Cllr. N. Hunt - Re. Urgent Item 12 – Proposal to provide free town centre car parking for the month of August 2021 as he owns a business within the affected areas mentioned in the report.

3. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the following meetings were approved:

- 12 May 2021
- 2 June 2021

4. **Pre-decision Scrutiny**

The Committee scrutinised the following Cabinet Board items:

Budget Monitoring and Update Report 2021/22

Members were provided with an update in relation to current budget projections for the 2021/22 financial year.

Officers highlighted that the Council was very early on in the 2021/22 financial year and that the report was a budget monitoring update position calculated as at the end of May 2021 and projected to the end of March 2022. It was stated that at present, it was forecasted that the Net Authority budget will underspend this year by £178k; there were some variations reflected in the report, along with a number of assumptions that Welsh Government would continue to provide monies from the Local Authority Hardship Fund to support both increase costs and loss of income. It was mentioned that Officers were still waiting for clarification on some of those monies and Members will be updated on the position on a by-monthly basis.

The circulated report predicted that there would be an increased number of children having to go into residential care; Members asked if this was as a result of the lockdown pressures on vulnerable families. The Director of Social Services, Health and Housing confirmed that there was a significant increase in mental health issues amongst young people as a result of the lockdown pressures; there was also an increase in the number of families that were in significant distress as a result of being confined together for long periods of time. It was stated that there was a protracted period in which the Council wasn't able to provide its intensive support packages to families within their homes, due to the virus and the safety issues around doing so; the normal outlets that families had to reduce stresses, such as children going to school, also weren't available. The Committee was informed that as a result of this, there was an increased pressure across the Looked after Children sector and in particular the residential care sector; it was predicted that 3 or more extra placements would be needed this year. Members were reassured that where children need to be taken into care or have their needs met within residential care settings, this will be done; and also when appropriate, reuniting children with their families.

In relation to elderly residential care, the report stated that from September 2021 there could be a reduction in the amount of financial support which could impact on the viability of some care settings and providers. Members expressed their concerns with this and asked if Officers could expand on this statement further, elaborating on what the consequences would be for the Directorate and the wider Council. Members were informed that Welsh Government had been providing financial support to residential care homes that were below the threshold of 90% occupancy; in September 2021, Welsh Government planned to reduce this. It was mentioned that there were some caveats to this, however Officers weren't aware of the details as of yet. The report highlighted that if the reduction in financial support by Welsh Government was not handled cautiously, then the Council would predict that a significant number of care homes could be left in an un-viable position financially; meaning that some care homes may need to close down, leaving fewer care homes for the future. Officers stated that depending on the outcome, the Council may need to step in to support the sector financially; there will be a detailed report presented to the Social Care, Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee which will include some of the predications.

A discussion took place in relation to the under spend in 'other community care/direct payments'; it was asked whether the under spend was related to the pandemic and the possible delays in assessment for those needing care. It was confirmed that the sector was having issues with recruitment into domiciliary care and with providing direct payments due to the impact of Covid; there was also a number of domiciliary care workers who had contracted the virus and become very ill, and were therefore not working. Officers stated that this was issue for Councils across Wales and England and was something that needed to be looked at nationally.

It was asked if it was possible, going forward in the by-monthly reports, to include the balance from previous years in the general reserve balance summary. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services stated that there wouldn't be any benefit in viewing the balance from previous years, as there would have been so many different impacts throughout the various years; it would not provide any meaningful information as the balance of the current year was the figure of real value.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

Treasury Management Monitoring Report 2021/22

The Committee received a report which set out treasury management action and information for the first quarter of 2021/22.

Detailed in the circulated report, it stated that the Bank of England warned that the pandemic will result in a 'sharp and large' economic shock; Members asked what measures the Council had planned to deal with such drastic cuts. Officers highlighted that there was a lot of speculation going across the financial markets as to how the UK Government was going to balance its forward looking budgets post Covid 19; at the moment they were working on a comprehensive spending review which was due to be announced in November. It was mentioned that there were lots of different messages being communicated out of the Government; until some of those go through that particular spending review and the Chancellors budget statements, that were due in November, the Council will not have any real certainty in regards to how much money was being invested in public spending. Members were informed that work had been undertaken by Wales Fiscal Analysis and the Institute for Fiscal Studies in England; the Welsh analysis seemed to suggest that the

public funds for Wales could increase by 0.9% next year or potentially up to 2.9% for future years. It was noted that if this was the case, it would be a significant challenge, especially as the pandemic had not ended and Covid 19 had an impact on the way in which the overall finances were managed. In terms of the arrangements, it was mentioned that Officers were looking to develop a Forward Financial Plan to present to Members in the autumn period and there would be an All Member Seminar towards the end of September; these would provide Members with an indication of the assumptions that were being built into the plans for 2022/23 and onwards.

Following Scrutiny, the report was noted.

5. **Forward Work Programme 2021/22**

The Committee noted the Cabinet Scrutiny Forward Work Programme 2021/22.

6. **Urgent Items**

Because of the need to deal now with the matters contained in Minute No. 7 and 9 below, the Chairperson agreed that these could be raised at today's meeting as urgent items pursuant to Statutory Instrument No.2290 (as amended).

Reason for Urgency:

Due to the time element.

7. **Proposal to provide free town centre car parking for the month of August 2021**

(Cllr. S.Rahaman and Cllr. N.Hunt re-affirmed their interest at this point and withdrew from the meeting)

Members were presented with a report which set out proposals to provide free town centre car parking within Neath Port Talbot during the month of August 2021.

Officers were asked to provide confirmation on how the fees would be funded. It was confirmed that the fees would be reimbursed from the Councils existing budget or reserves.

It was queried whether there was a way to monitor the impact of the use of car parks during this period and a way to capture any feedback from businesses. Officers stated that they would need to compare pre

Covid data, and the current year's data for the first quarter, and monitor the monthly income that was received from each car park across the County Borough; this would be the most efficient way to do this, as carrying out surveys on the ground would require a large resource. It was suggested that after the Christmas period, a report be presented to Members to show some trends in how the scheme performed in terms of its income.

It was agreed that the Head of Transport and Engineering would liaise with colleagues in the Regeneration Team, specifically the Town Centre Managers, to identify a way to obtain feedback from the town centre businesses.

A discussion took place in relation to the pilot project on free town centre parking that Welsh Government agreed to a few years ago; Members asked if there was any information available on the outcome of that pilot and the prospects of it being rolled out more consistently. Officers stated that not all Authorities participated in this initiative; Neath Port Talbot Council had some experience from what offers the Council had introduced, and at the time that was linked with the former Neath Business Improvement District (BID). It was mentioned that they introduced footfall counters and had dialogue with the businesses to identify how those initiatives worked, and the Council received some initial feedback from that. Historically, it was noted that Neath Port Talbot Council had always offered free Christmas parking; before the pandemic, Officers received some evidence from the Aberavon Shopping Centre Manager which indicated an 11% increase in footfall at that time. Officers added that it was very difficult for the Council to make a clear statement around what factual difference it made to the high street and prosperity. Members were informed of the Portas Review that was carried out, and from that a number of studies were undertaken about the re-thinking of parking on the high street; town centres have suffered pre-pandemic and even more so now, as a result of the pandemic. It was stated that car parking was a key aspect that affected how a town centre performed and was very much at the forefront of it; however, parking income was only one aspect of the issue, there were several others which the Recover, Reset, Renew agenda will consider going forward, as part of the town centre recovery. Officers hoped that this initiative will help aid the recovery of the town centre for the short period, before making further assessments going forward; there was a lot more work to be carried out around this subject matter.

The circulated report referred to the free bus scheme in Swansea; Members hoped to obtain information on the outcome of this scheme and were disappointed that there wasn't co-ordination on a possible joint scheme between Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. It was stated that although the Neath Port Talbot Council worked very closely regionally with colleagues across the bus sector, it was unknown to the Council that Swansea were proposing the scheme; Officers would be asking colleagues in the City and County of Swansea if they could share the concessionary impacts of footfall on those services. Members were informed that Welsh Government and Transport for Wales had viewed the press statements and have shown an interest to identify how that scheme worked going forward; there was a commitment on the City and County of Swansea to share that information through the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) which will enable the Council to have access to their success stories or otherwise. Officers added that when considering the wider review that was taking place, it was important to note that bus services in some areas of the community was currently lacking which was an issue that would continue to be looked into.

It was mentioned that some Elected Members and Council staff paid yearly fees for parking as part of the permit scheme; Members asked if any money would be reimbursed to those individuals for the free months made available as part of the initiative. Officers stated that it would be a small amount in terms of providing a monthly rebate, so instead the Council would be adding an extra month onto all permits so that there would be no detriment to them financially.

Members asked if there were any car parks excluded from the scheme. It was confirmed that the scheme only applied to the town centre pay and display car parks; the Country Park car parks and the Aberavon Seafront car parks weren't included in the initiative. Officers added that there were a number of car parks across the County Borough that had no charges incurred and this would not be affected by the scheme either.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

(Cllr. S.Rahaman and Cllr. N.Hunt re-joined the meeting from this point onwards)

8. **Access to Meetings**

RESOLVED: that pursuant to Section 100A(4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded for the following items of business which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

9. **Ground Lease of Land and Buildings at Neath Abbey Industrial Estate Neath - Proposed Purchase of Freehold Reversionary Interest**

Members were provided with a report which detailed the proposed purchase of freehold reversionary interest related to the ground lease of land and buildings at Neath Abbey Industrial Estate in Neath.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

CHAIRPERSON