

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

(Via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

24 November 2021

Chairperson: Councillor S.Rahaman

Vice Chairperson: Councillor S.E.Freeguard

Councillors: N.T.Hunt, D.Keogh, S.Miller, R.Mizen,
S.Paddison, 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, N.Pearce,
H.Jones, M.Shaw, J.Woodman-Ralph and
C.Plowman

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

1. Pre-decision Scrutiny

The Committee scrutinised the following Cabinet items:

Short Term Service Resilience Framework

Members received the Short Term Service Resilience Framework which was set to minimise the risk of service disruption in the short term.

The Chief Executive explained how service demands had increased over recent months and how this had impacted the overall workforce.

It was noted that Welsh Government had reduced the alert level to Level Zero on 7th August 2021, which resulted in a lot more social mixing across various communities; by 24 October 2021 the number of cases locally had risen to 1037.6 cases per 100,000 population, with almost 1 in 3 people testing positive for Covid 19 at that time. Officers mentioned that the rates had reduced since then; at the time

of writing the report, the number of cases were at 653.8 cases per 100,000 population.

Despite the reduction in the number of cases, it was stated that the Coronavirus rates across the community remained very high, and the increase in community transmission has had a further impact on demands in services; for example the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) Service had become busier and there were significant impacts across the health and social care system. Members were informed that service areas across the Council were continuing to operate under Covid risk assessments; this was affecting the way in which the Council was able to provide services, and the number of people available to provide those services. It was noted that a lot more individuals within the community were coming forward with various needs, as a result of living through 20 months of the pandemic.

Officers highlighted that some service areas had significant backlogs in their work that needed attention; this was due to setting some work aside in order to be able to deal with the priorities that Welsh Government had asked Councils to take on board.

Members were informed that the Council had received funding for some very exciting projects within the County Borough, which Officers were supportive of taking forward; this meant that they needed to be considered in the Councils short term service resilience plans.

It was explained that the amount of people available to service the demand had diminished slightly over recent months; there were a number of reasons for this, which were set out in the circulated report. Officers mentioned that some service areas were experiencing challenges with recruiting people into vacancies; there was currently a lot of vacant jobs within the local economy, and some of those in the private sector had more benefits and/or better pay than those within the public sector.

In terms of the Councils current situation, it was noted that there was an increased demand, slightly less people to deal with the demand, and backlogs which required additional staff beyond the usual capacity levels; immediate steps needed to be taken to try and fill the outstanding vacancies, as well as bringing in additional capacity to ensure that the workforce was supported over the winter months. It was added that the Council was able to offer the various roles externally; with the hope that local people will apply.

Officers explained that there was a current underspend within the current cash limit that had previously been approved; the proposal set out to use £2million of the detailed underspend for the Service Resilience Framework in order to bring in additional staff.

It was highlighted that the recent All Member Seminar relating to service pressures was very informative, and brought Members up to date on the current pressures and what steps needed to be put in place in order to relieve some of those pressures.

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

Monthly Budget Monitoring Report 2021/2022

The Committee were provided with the Monthly Budget Monitoring Report for 2021/22.

The Chief Finance Officer provided an overview of the circulated report; currently Officers were predicting that by the end of March 2022, the Council will have an underspend of approximately £8.3million. It was noted that there were various reasons for this; one of the main points being that when the budget was set, there was a huge level of uncertainty in terms of the Covid 19 Hardship Fund. Therefore, it was noted that a great level of contingency was included into the budget; at this point in time, Officers predicted that this level of contingency wouldn't be needed. Officers explained that the Council was also collecting more council tax income than anticipated; there were also less people needing council tax support than originally forecast.

Members were informed that this underspend was not forecasted to be recurring, as it was anticipated that the vacant posts will be filled, and the Council will be able to start delivering some initiatives that had been put in place.

Officers were proposing not to use the £3.1million, which was originally planned, from general reserves; and were proposing to put £2million into the Service Resilience Framework and another £2million back into specific reserves.

A discussion took place in relation to sufficient levels of general reserves; the Audit Wales guidance suggested that a prudent level for general reserves would be 5% of the budget. Members noted that Neath Port Talbot Council's level was significantly higher than that in the guidance, and compared to other Councils across Wales;

concerns were expressed in relation to the balance between general reserves and the council tax levels which were set for the current financial year.

The circulated report detailed that cardboard and food waste were no longer incurring costs for disposal and were generating income instead, resulting in an anticipated reduction in the net costs of waste disposal; Members asked for further information on this and the shift in the service. The Director of Environment and Regeneration confirmed that the waste industry was very volatile; the price of cardboard, plastic, glass etc. changed very frequently. It was noted that the Council could go from a position of paying people to take materials, to a position of securing an income from those recyclables. Members were informed that there were pockets within the County Borough in which there was a lack of co-operation from some residents; the Council would be undertaking a pilot scheme in one of those areas, to try and encourage those residents to increase their recycling in order for the Council to achieve the targets set by Welsh Government. It was explained that last year the Council did not achieve the targets, however this year the targets were achieved; the Council exceeded the targets this year and were one of very few Authorities to make significant improvement in performance.

Members queried that if the Council was to fill all of the vacant posts, there would be a significant difference in the payroll position. Officers confirmed that there was currently around 200 vacancies within the Council, and if all of these posts were to be filled, it would have a considerable impact on the budget; this needed to be kept in mind for the future.

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

Capital Budget Monitoring 2021/22

Members received information in relation to the delivery of the 2021/22 Capital Programme.

Officers stated that the report set out a proposed budget of £82.4million which was £2.3million less than what was approved; the schedule of changes were detailed in appendix 2 of the circulated report. It was noted that the Council had incurred £30.6million of expenditure, which was 37% delivery of the capital programme; this was highlighted to be on track considering the delays in delivering projects and spending money.

The circulated report detailed that a budget of £2.584m had been included in 2021/22 for Margam Park Activity Investment; however, £2.336m has been re profiled into 2022/23 to reflect the profile of the works required. Members asked if Officers could clarify what was meant by 're profiled'; it was confirmed that the works were not able to proceed as planned, therefore the monies were being transferred into the next financial year.

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

CHAIRPERSON

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