

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

(Via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

28 February 2022

Chairperson: Councillor S.Rahaman

Councillors: N.T.Hunt, S.K.Hunt, D.Keogh, C.James, S.A.Knoyle, A.Llewelyn, S.Miller, S.Paddison, S.H.Reynolds, R.L.Taylor and A.N.Woolcock

Officers In Attendance K.Jones, A.Jarrett, A.Thomas, N.Pearce, C.Griffiths, H.Jones, C.Furlow-Harris, N.Blackmore, J.Woodman-Ralph and C.Davies

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. **Declarations of Interests**

The following Member made a declaration of interest at the start of the meeting.

Councillor M.Harvey	Re: Agenda Items 5,6,7 and 9 within the Cabinet papers as he works for South Wales Police but felt his interest was not prejudicial.
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2. **Pre-decision Scrutiny**

The Committee scrutinised the following urgent Cabinet item:

Revenue Budget 2022/23

Members Considered the Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's 2022/23 revenue budget including investments in services, investments from reserves and proposed council tax levels, as detailed within the circulated report.

Discussions took place around the proposal to freeze Neath Port Talbot Council Tax for 2022/23. It was highlighted that Neath Port Talbot have the third highest council tax in Wales. Within the Consultation it was noted that there was a high percentage of responses in favour of the freeze. However, it was queried that there was not an option within the consultation to reduce Council Tax and members felt that this may also have had a good response. Members highlighted that further in the report pack there was an urgent item in relation to setting up a hardship fund utilising monies from the underspend. Members queried whether that money could be utilised to cover the additional money to propose a reduction in council tax. The Section 151 officer explained that he is duty bound to provide a prudent, affordable and sustainable proposals for the Cabinet and Council to consider and within his professional role he felt that a freeze was the most affordable and sustainable option for members to consider. Members asked Cabinet to reconsider the level of council tax going to Cabinet and Council and to provide an alternative proposal showing a cut in Council Tax.

Members queried that if 3.1 million were to be moved out of general reserves would there be 17 million remaining. Officers confirmed that there would be 17 Million remaining in general reserves.

It was also highlighted that the charge for pest control had decreased to a charge of £40.

Members discussed the potential for any unexpected issues arising in future, following the result of the pandemic. Therefore, felt that it was important to ensure that we can provide the public with an affordable council tax rate along with ensuring the council has sustainable reserves.

Members asked cabinet to consider prior to the decision on Council Tax being taken at Council tomorrow, would they consider reducing Council Tax rather than a freeze currently included in the recommendations at today's meeting. As a result some members abstained from the vote that followed.

Following scrutiny, the recommendations detailed within the report were supported to Cabinet.

Capital Strategy and Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2024/25

Members received the Capital Strategy and Capital Programme for 2022/23 to 2024/25. The Capital Strategy sets out the Capital Programme planning process, governance and financial sustainability considerations, as detailed within the circulated report.

Discussions took place around the costings of the work completed on Margam Castle's stone work. It was noted that the work was approved as part of last year's capital programme.

Members also discussed prudential borrowing. It was noted that interest rates are low currently. It was noted that the Section 151 officer would provide further details on prudential borrowing outside the meeting.

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

Monthly Budget Monitoring Report 2021/22 – As at end of December 2021

Members received an update on the Council's projected budget position based on information available as at 31st December 2021.

Members were advised that the urgent Item that is due to be discussed at today's meeting was connected to this report.

Members queried whether the 2.3 million pound underspend could be utilised to reduce council tax. The section 151 officer explained that the underspend would be considered by Cabinet.

It was highlighted that if Cabinet opted to agree with the Hardship Fund, then the council had utilised the underspend to support people in difficult times.

Members queried the underspend in Additional Learning needs. It was noted that funding as received and therefore weren't required to use core funding resulting in an underspend. The money has been put in to reserves to support the following year as funding isn't guaranteed to be received for the following year

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

Capital Budget Monitoring 2021/22

Members were provided with information in relation to the delivery of the 2021/22 Capital Programme.

Members queried the grant received to support coal tip safety. It was asked whether this grant was adequate. Officers highlighted that they were pleased to receive a grant and it was providing support for the high risk coal tips. It was noted that the amount of money to support all coal tips would be a huge cost and would be very unlikely to be received from the government.

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

Treasury Management Strategy, Annual Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy

Officers highlighted the Council's Treasury Management Strategy, Annual Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy for 2022/23, as detailed within the circulated report.

Reassurance was sought in relation to treasury management and the link to the current national situation in Europe. It was noted that all our investments are with UK banks or UK authorities and officers reassured members that there weren't any risks from the emerging situations.

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

3. Urgent Items

Because of the need to deal with the matter contained in Minute No. 12 below, the Chairperson agreed this could be raised at today's meeting as an urgent item pursuant to Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

Reason:

Due to time element.

4. Pre-decision scrutiny

The Committee scrutinised the following urgent Cabinet item:

Proposal to Create a Targeted Hardship Relief Scheme

Members were informed of the request for further advice as to how the remaining underspend for 2021/22 can be utilised to develop a range of measures to support those who are hardest hit by the cost of living crisis, as detailed in the circulated report.

It was noted that following publication of the latest revenue budget monitoring report which contains details of a further £2.3m underspend (after reserve transfers) the Cabinet had requested further advice in relation to how this underspend can be used to support those residents of the County Borough who are currently hardest hit by the cost of living crisis.

Members commended the report and the reasoning for having a hardship fund. It was queried what type of criteria would be set. It was noted that it was just to set the money aside for the scheme to be developed and the criteria would be set at a future meeting. Members were concerned about supporting the report without the criteria however, understood the principal of the hardship fund and potential criteria.

Discussions took place around the lateness of the report. The Cabinet Member for finance explained that the report was late due to the late notification of the amount of underspend following a recent meeting.

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

CHAIRPERSON