

Minutes of the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

8 January 2024

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

Chairperson:	Councillor R.Phillips
Councillors:	W.Carpenter, N.Goldup-John, J.Henton, C.Lewis, R.Mizen, P.A.Rees, S.Renkes, S.H.Reynolds and R.W.Wood
Co-opted Voting Members:	A. Amor and M.Caddick
Co-opted Non Voting Members:	R.De Benedictis
Officers In Attendance	I.Guy, H.Lervy, C.Millis, A.Thomas, R.Crowhurst, C.Saunders, C.Morris, N.Blackmore, N.Daniel, H.Jones and P.Chivers
Cabinet Invitees:	Councillors J.Hurley, N.Jenkins and C.Phillips

1. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None received

3. **BUDGET CONSULTATION 2024/25**

The Chair advised members that comments from the meeting will form part of the formal consultation response to the budget 2024/25.

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.

The Chief Finance Officer gave a brief overview of the consultation process. The budget consultation commenced on 20th December 2023 and closes on 10th January 2024. This timeframe was deemed sufficient for members to consider the proposals and provide officers adequate time to consider feedback, before final proposals are presented to Cabinet in March 2024.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that work had been ongoing for a number of months to identify the scale of the budget gap. The focus has been to secure services and protect jobs.

Heads of Service gave an overview of the savings and income generation proposals contained in Appendix 4 of the agenda report pack.

In relation to Margam Country Park (ELLL1), members enquired about the implications of the staff loss mentioned.

Officers confirmed that operationally, there was no loss of staff as the reference related to a staff member taking flexible retirement, this arrangement enabled skills and experience to be retained.

Members enquired on the previous proposals for a Zip Line at Margam Park.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that a full report would be brought back to this committee before the end of the financial year, in relation to the future strategic direction of Margam Park.

Members enquired if the levelling up funding would affect the savings proposals for the Princess Royal Theatre (ELLL3).

Officers confirmed that no details were known at present, a planning meeting will take place shortly and the development phase is

expected to be in the region of 12 months. The theatre would be closed for a considerable period of time whilst work is undertaken.

In relation to the Indoor Leisure proposal (ELLL4), members questioned the high amount of savings stated in the report and the implications if this saving is not realised. Members also questioned whether the cost of equipment depreciation has been taken into account and global events which may cause energy prices to rise.

Officers agreed that the proposal needed careful monitoring. The majority of the income would be achieved from memberships and energy savings. The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning acknowledged the risks and confirmed there is an understanding of the volatility of the figures which can be affected by world events. The savings figure stated in the report represents a reduction in operating deficit not a profit.

Members referenced page 21 of the report and the mention of further delays in Celtic Leisure being brought in house and the related costings. Members noted that Trade Unions are reporting staff insecurities and an ongoing impact on morale and questioned whether staff morale could affect the achievement of the proposed efficiencies. Trade Unions have called for a working party to develop a workable business plan over the next few months and members asked how the council would respond.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that a business plan for the Leisure Service Directorate will be presented to this committee prior to Celtic Leisure being brought back in-house. The Business Plan would be the responsibility of the Head of Leisure, Tourism, Heritage and Culture as part of the overall Leisure Services Directorate. Any request for a working party would be for the Celtic Board to address with Trade Unions. Celtic Leisure have a current business plan which will allow them to deliver the efficiencies detailed in the report.

In relation to Primary School Cleaning (ELLL9), Members raised concern that schools may opt to employ private companies who may lack knowledge and experience that was gained during the recent pandemic. Members also questioned the price difference between the current provision and private companies.

Officers do not anticipate that schools would opt to employ private companies as the service currently provided is well regarded. A

meeting is planned with the Cleaning Manager to identify implications for schools and ensure schools are reassured that they will receive the same high quality service. Officers noted that pre-Covid, private companies could not provide the required safeguards needed for school cleaning and this is unlikely to have changed.

Members questioned whether schools would continue to use the service but reduce their cleaning time.

The Director of Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that this was a possibility, but noted that certain areas in schools require daily cleaning and there would be no scope for cutbacks in these areas. The Director commented that the proposal was regrettable but unavoidable in the current economic climate and every effort would be made to protect the service and retain in-house.

Members agreed that the cleaning service is highly regarded but commented that some schools, particularly primary schools, were facing challenging financial circumstances and any reduction in service could have a detrimental effect on school finances and children's safety.

Members asked if there were checks and monitoring in place should schools employ private companies to ensure that schools are maintained at the required standard.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that no private operators are employed presently. Should this situation change the authority would assist schools in preparing a specification, but the responsibility would fall on the governing body. Officers confirmed that this would be a huge responsibility as currently this is covered by cleaning services who adhere to all regulations in regards to training/COSHH.

Members asked for further clarification in relation to proposals ELLL 11/12 & 13 and the offset of grants against core costs.

Officers confirmed that there was no consequence to the proposals. In relation to the Youth Service proposal there was an uplift of £10k which is being claimed back against the core. In relation to period dignity there are already a huge amount of resources available within schools which enables the admin costs to be redirected this financial year. The RCSIG saving would be taken from an underspend.

Members referenced the proposal to increase income above 7.5% threshold on the pest control service (ENV20); and queried how any increase in council charges compared with private company fees.

Officers noted that it was difficult to make a comparison as many private companies do not publicise their fees, but it is understood that Neath Port Talbot pest control fees are favourable compared to the private sector.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning drew member's attention to a budget proposal which did not fall under the remit of the committee but related to the grounds maintenance of schools (ENV14).

Members questioned whether there was any additional bureaucracy around changes to procurement in relation to the savings proposal SCH1.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that additional bureaucracy was a possibility but if schools follow advice they will be able to secure goods and services in a more efficient way which will not be onerous.

The Chair thanked all Officers and their teams for their ongoing hard work.

Members considered the Budget Consultation Report 2024/25 as presented. There were no additional budget proposals put forward by members at the meeting.

Following scrutiny, Members noted the report.

4. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

Councillor R. Phillips

Chairperson