

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Special Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk on Tuesday 7th January 2014 at 10.00am

PRESENT: County Councillor S.G.M. Howarth (Chairman)

County Councillors: A. Easson, R. Edwards, M. Hickman, M. Powell, A.E. Webb, S. White and A.Wintle

ALSO PRESENT:

County Councillor R. J. W. Greenland - Cabinet Member for Innovation, Enterprise and Leisure
County Councillor P. Murphy – Cabinet Member for Resources

BY INVITATION OF THE CHAIRMAN:

County Councillor R.G. Harris

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Ms K. Bierne	-	Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture
Mrs J. Robson	-	Head of Finance
Mr M. Howcroft	-	Assistant Head of Finance
Mr R. Hoggins	-	Assistant Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture
Mr G. Edmunds	-	Cleansing and Waste Management
Mr T. Wallen	-	Highways Operations Manager
Ms R. Jowitt	-	Waste Strategy and Resources Manager
Ms H. Ilett	-	Scrutiny Manager
Mrs E. Tapper	-	Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors: D.W.H Jones and V.E. Smith

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

County Councillor S.G.M Howarth declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 given that the company responsible for pest control on behalf of the Authority had involvement with the football club operated by the elected member (Minute item 8: Draft Revenue Budget Proposals Mandate 13 – Street Scene and Pest Control).

3. CHAIRMANS WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Members, Officers and Mr N. Tatum, representing Abergavenny Town Council, to the meeting.

4. DRAFT CAPITAL BUDGET PROPOSALS 2014/15 TO 2017/18

We received the draft Capital Budget Proposals 2014 /15 to 2017/18 from the Head of Finance.

In so doing we noted that:

- Cabinet would review the Capital programme subject to revision of the 21st Century School programme.
- Cabinet had agreed to the sale of some of the Authority's assets to support the capital programme, including the associated costs of disposal to facilitate those sales.
- The capital budget was reporting a pressure of £134, 334, 000 attributable to; a review of the waste management service, highways maintenance, infrastructure investments, property maintenance for schools and non – schools including Caldicot Castle, DDA compliance works and Disabled Facilities Grants as well as Countryside Rights of Way programmes.
- We heard that the latter pressures were not being addressed in the current strategy and existing maintenance programmes were barely sufficient to maintain existing assets or deal with the backlog. Cabinet had taken the decision to accept that risk.
- The Authority received the provisional capital settlement from Welsh Government on 16th October 2013 which identified an increase of £149 000 on 2013/14 levels.
- £1 million unsupported prudential borrowing per annum would continue in the 4 year capital programme.
- A deficit had been identified in year 4 of the capital programme.
- The capital strategy adopted by the Authority should prove financially sustainable through supported funding from Welsh Government and use of the Capital Investment Reserve. This would enable the Authority to concentrate its own resources on the 21st Century Schools investment programme. The 21st Century Schools Strategic Outline Programme in December 2011 identified a match funding capital requirement for the Authority of approximately £40 million.
- We acknowledged that there would be a requirement for Council to maximise its capital receipts generation over the period 2013/14 to 2017/18. Capital receipts were forecast to increase from £5 926 000 to £32 457 000 in 2017/18, subject to those receipts materialising.
- We noted that a revised County Farms strategy had been approved, further rationalisation of Council owned building was being considered, the identification of services which could be combined to release buildings for sale and maximising receipts from the Authority's involvement in low cost homeownership schemes were intended to generate further receipts.

The Committee expressed a desire to further scrutinise the sale and disposal of capital assets, presented as exempt information.

5. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

County Councillor A. E. Webb proposed the exclusion of the press and public during discussion of appendices 6 and 7, the sale and disposal of capital assets, in accordance with Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the item involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the Act. This was duly seconded by County Councillor

A.M. Wintle. We resolved to exclude the press and public during discussion of appendix 6 and 7.

6. CAPITAL ASSETS/DISPOSALS

We reviewed and discussed the information contained within the exempt documentation.

The Committee resolved to note the information received and requested that Members receive a portfolio of the assets held by the Authority. The Committee also requested to be informed of asset disposals and the value achieved from their sale.

7. RE ADMISSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

County Councillor A. E. Webb proposed to re - admit the press and public to the meeting during consideration of the following items of business. This was duly seconded by County Councillor R. Edwards.

We resolved to readmit the press and public to the meeting for the following item of business.

8. DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2014 – 15 TO 2017 -18

We received the draft revenue budget proposals for 2014/15 to 2017/18 for scrutiny from the Head of Finance.

In so doing, we noted the following:

- A budget gap of £22 million was projected in the MTFP over four years, with an £8.8 million gap for 2014/15. Savings totalling £12.8million had been identified over the MTFP. These savings had been generated by means of service changes, efficiency savings, income generation and innovative approaches to service design and delivery. A 3% annual increase in Council Tax had been assumed. A residual gap of £2.4 million for 2014/15 remained.
- A series of citizen consultation events had generated 82 potential saving proposals for exploration. 20 ideas, not included in the current budget mandates, resulted from these events. Staff sessions were also held by the Leader and the Chief Executive.
- Work to address the long term reduction in resources was essential and ongoing.
- Further to a review of grant funding schemes a pressure of £232 000 had been incorporated for waste, due to a reduction of 8.6% in the Sustainable Waste Management Grant.
- Earmarked reserve usage over the MTFP was projected to reduce the balance on earmarked reserves from £15.5million at the start of 2013/14 to £6.9 million by the end of 2017/18.

We resolved to note the information provided and to afford further consideration to the following mandates, previously scrutinised at the special meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held on 8th November 2013.

- **Sustainable Energy Opportunities**

The Committee expressed support for Officers to implement the actions necessary to reduce energy consumption, install biomass boilers and to support the continued

investigation of income generation from PV panels and wind.

- **All Grant Review**

We noted that the review of Council grant funding to third party providers had been completed and approved by Cabinet. The Head of Finance informed Members that this mandate had been prioritised in order to assist third sector organisations in their financial planning.

Members raised the issue of Capital funding for Area Committees. We questioned why Area Committee capital grant funding allocation had not reduced to £5 000 from £15 000 in the capital budget proposals for 2014/15 despite the recommendation to Council from the Review of Area Committees to agree this reduction.

The Democratic Services Officer sought the relevant extract from the meeting of Council held on 21st November 2013 which stated:

“We resolved to agree recommendations and amendment as follows:

Reduce £15k Environment/Capital Fund to £5k per area, total saving £40k subject to consideration within the Medium Term Financial Plan Capital Grant”

The Head of Finance agreed that this could be incorporated as a budget saving in the capital budget proposals for 2014/15.

- **RC Highways Operations and Traffic Management**

Members queried the impact of a reduction of winter maintenance stand by payments reduced Officer stand - by payments and amendments made to gritting routes and the installation of a new weather station on service delivery.

The following changes were also noted:

- Introduction of a new biodiversity policy and reduced verge maintenance to include the removal of flower beds from the Authority’s roundabouts.

- Reduced cost/reliance upon subcontractors

We heard that the reduction in the number of subcontractors and associated costs would be achieved through additional investment in equipment for use by the Authority’s direct work force.

- Improved management and regulation of street furniture and exploit advertising.

The Assistant Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture advised that this issue required careful consideration and sought the support of members of Strong Communities Select Committee in establishing a working group to ensure that this and highways advertising policies were applied consistently across the Authority. Arrangements for the working group would be made outside of the meeting.

- Reduced management structure and workforce for highways operations and traffic and development by means of retirement and natural wastage.

The proposal to restructure the management team from 2 to 1 had been taken in order to afford protection for front line services

We were advised that the Authority’s ability to respond to emergency situations would be reduced but that the impact would be minimised given that the loss of 2 – 3 operative posts were proposed. Members noted however that in the previous 12 month period, there had been a reduction in staffing of 6 within Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance and that these vacancies had not been filled.

At this juncture, the Committee took the opportunity to commend the work of the Authority’s current highways staff in responding to recent flooding in the county.

The proposal to restructure the management team from 2 to 1 had been taken in

order to afford protection for front line services.

- **RC Street Lighting**

The proposal had been developed to reduce the Authority's energy bill, dimming lights by 50% and switching off 4500 residential lights at designated times using newly installed technology. No further investment would be required during 2014/15.

We were informed that £330 000 had been borrowed at an interest rate of 0%, repayable at £50 000 per annum for six years for the installation of the dimming equipment. The current budget would not sustain additional borrowing and as such the number of lights to be dimmed would not be increased.

We received assurance that there would not be a total switch off on the Authority's trunk roads.

The Local Member for Drybridge informed Mr Wallen that Old Hereford Road, Monmouth had been without street lighting for 3 – 4 months and had noted that there were more individual lamps out of service since the installation of dimming equipment in Monmouth.

Mr Wallen agreed to investigate.

- **RC Street Scene Services including Pest Control**

We noted the proposal to reduce funding levels for street cleansing by reducing manual street sweeping operations and removing specific provision for a village sweeper by creating new schedules for town sweepers which would include a level of street sweeping for villages. Effectively these proposals would generate a saving of £115,000 (comprising a £50 000 reduction in manual sweeping costs and a £65 000 reduction in precinct sweeper costs) These proposals also embraced a reduction in manual sweeper resources for Usk and Caldicot (Each location being cut from full to 50% cover).

The Authority was open to dialogue with relevant Town and Community Councils on whether they would prefer to invest in the service or take over certain cleansing activities. A flexible model was being sought to allow Town and Community Councils to agree arrangements unique to their needs. The Head of Operations cited Abergavenny Town Council as an example of one of numerous service models already adopted; Abergavenny Town Council contributes 50% towards the cost of a litter picker and determines how the resource is utilised. Monmouthshire County Council employs the litter picker.

The Assistant Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture informed the Committee that the number of sweepers would be reduced from 5 to 4, precinct sweepers would be zoned, and rural areas would be covered by highways sweepers. We received assurance that rescheduling opportunities would be undertaken to ensure equitable service provision.

- **Pest Control**

We heard that local authorities have a statutory duty under the Prevention of Damage of Pests Act 1949 to ensure their area is free from rats and mice. The Authority currently provides a free pest control service to Monmouthshire households. In response to a Member question we were advised that this service did not extend to False Widow spiders but the Waste and Resources Manager provided assurance that Environmental Health would provide a response in emergency situations such as this.

The proposal to remove the free service did not receive unanimous support from the Committee. We queried whether the service could be remodelled and provided in house. We heard that the Authority would act as facilitator and direct members of the

public to find a pest control provider which met with their requirements.

The Waste and Resources Manager informed the Committee that the current contractor for pest control had been retained to date given that it would have been inappropriate to go out to tender and proceed to withdraw the service. We received assurance that should the Authority retain the service that a tender process would be undertaken.

- **RC Collaboration Or Transfer Services To Town Councils And Community Councils**

The Assistant Chief Officer and Regeneration informed the Committee that he was meeting with Town and Community Councils to actively promote and investigate how the Authority can provide services and work more closely with Town and Community Councils. The Authority seeks to elaborate upon and extend existing partnership arrangements in order to maintain front line services.

Models of working needed to be flexible in order to maximise Town and Community Council buy – in.

We heard that cluster working may help some Town and Community Councils to work together more successfully.

- **CEO Efficiencies and Staff Restructuring**

We noted that a saving of £595 000 had been proposed within CEO in order to refocus services to improve efficiency and increase the value added in the current financial climate.

Efficiency savings of 5% totalling £100 000 within Democracy and Elections were proposed. The Local Member for Dewstow stated that the existing staff structure within Democratic Services should remain and the Local Member for Overmonnow stated that Members should support staff where possible. Some Members objected to staff sending email communications “out of hours” whilst acknowledging that this was a feature of agile working.

With regard to efficiency savings within the Customer Access Unit of £100 000, Members requested an update relating to the integration of libraries and telephony. The Democratic Services Officer agreed to source this information for Members.

The Cabinet Member for Innovation, Enterprise and Leisure stated that this was part of on - going service changes but that substantial change was not envisaged for the beginning of the financial year.

Members acknowledged that there were many more aspects that could potentially be linked to libraries. We heard that the Authority was in the early stages of discussions with Usk Library Group to investigate the possibility of the Usk Group operating the library with one lead librarian.

We received confirmation that National Parks had withdrawn from the Tourist Information Centre in Abergavenny with a £30 000 loss of income.

Members expressed the need to retain the Tourist Information Centres in the short term and raised the possibility of relocating Abergavenny Tourist Information Centre in

the Tithe Barn.

Some Members felt that the business case should be amended and sought assurance that the £180 000 of savings were not solely on staff. The Cabinet Member for Innovation, Enterprise and Leisure confirmed this. The Committee resolved not to amend the business case.

- **RC Waste and Recycling**

The Local Member for Dewstow expressed concern regarding the increase in fly tipping in the Caldicot area and questioned how the Authority could educate the public in the proper use of the recycling scheme.

We noted the proposal to increase the cost of the brown bag collection from £8 to £10 per annum and there was no objection.

The Waste and Resources Manager informed the Committee that Welsh Government did not support the recycling scheme operated by Monmouthshire and a provision of £2.5 million had been made within the capital budget should the outcome of the Waste Review necessitate a change in the waste collection service.

We were advised that Welsh Government had already reduced the Waste Management Grant by £232 000. This was greater than anticipated. We noted that the grant was linked to population rather than the means by which waste was collected; however there was a possibility that the grant could be withdrawn in its entirety if Monmouthshire did not comply with the EU directive. The Waste and Resources Manager informed the Committee that she would be meeting with WLGA and LGA to discuss this issue,

Members expressed a preference for a bag rather than a box based scheme and the following points were noted:

- The recycling rate increased by 7% when fortnightly collections were introduced.
- Holiday arrangements are issued one year in advance with rate demands.
- The resale value of paper is higher when untreated hence the two bag system.
- A plant is being built in Carmarthen for the recycling of disposable nappies. The Authority is continuing to collect nappies using the yellow bag scheme and these are currently being sent to Slough. The Authority achieves a 20% recycling rate from nappy collection.
- The Authority is required to differentiate between kerbside and Civic Amenity recycling.
- Food and green waste are collected separately so that the Authority can determine the individual proportions for route optimisation.
- Glass collection banks had been removed from the Civic Amenity Sites.
- A cost analysis of the refuse bags was being undertaken and the quality of food waste bags was under review.

- **Summary MTFP Position**

We received a summary of the MTFP position from the Head of Finance and in so doing the Local Member for Drybridge requested a more detailed breakdown of the data presented by cost centre with a preference for the data to be illustrated in a graphical format. The Head of Finance agreed to consider this.

The Committee agreed to note the information provided and the Chairman expressed thanks to Members and Officers for their attendance and contribution.

The meeting ended at 12:35pm

