

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee held in the Council Chamber at County Hall, Usk on Monday 20th January 2014 at 2.00p.m.

PRESENT: County Councillor R.P. Jordan (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Blakebrough, P.R. Clarke, P.S. Farley, P. Jones, S. Jones and M. Powell.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr P. Matthews	-	Chief Executive	
Mrs. J. Robson	-	Head of Finance	
Mrs. D. Mountfield	-	Head of Achievement & Learning Infrastructure	
Mrs. N. Wellington	-	Finance Manager	
Ms. H. Ilett	-	Scrutiny Manager	
Mrs. E. Tapper	-	Democratic Services Officer	

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

County Councillor V.E. Smith

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillor D.W.H. Jones and County Councillor P. Murphy, Cabinet Member for Resources and Finance. Apologies for absence were also received from Ms. S. McGuinness, Chief Officer, Children and Young People.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

3. DRAFT CAPITAL BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2014/15 TO 2017/18

We received the draft capital budget proposals for 2014/15 to 2017/18 from the Head of Finance as presented to Cabinet on 4th December 2013. The Capital budget proposals are designed to provide a financially stable and sustainable environment to prioritise the 21st Century Schools Programme.

Assurance was provided that all capital receipts would be ring fenced in respect of 21st Century Schools. We noted that the delivery of the programme was reliant on the successful disposal of some of the Authority's assets.

In view of the Williams Report and its potential implications, Members expressed a desire to progress with the sale of the Authority's assets to ensure that receipts could be utilised for the benefit of 21st Century Schools within Monmouthshire.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee dated 20th January 2014 - continued

In response to a Member question regarding the security of the match funding from Welsh Government, should the recommendations of the Williams Report be accepted, the Head of Achievement & Learning Infrastructure expressed hope that this would be unaffected.

The Head of Finance reiterated that the Williams Report had not yet been implemented and in the meantime, it remained "business as usual." This view was echoed by the Chief Executive. Members welcomed assurance that the situation would be monitored very closely and an all Wales model was anticipated to be developed by April 2014, of which Members would be informed.

We noted that no inflationary increase had been applied to the Capital programme to reflect the lack of an inflationary increase from Welsh Government. We were advised that the Authority would seek to maximise the use of its funds through procurement.

We welcomed notice that the Authority had achieved a balanced capital budget and resolved to support the draft capital budget proposals for 2014/15 to 2017/18.

4. DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2014/15

We received the draft revenue budget proposals for 2014/15 from the Head of Finance and the business case mandates relevant to the remit of the Children and Young People Select Committee for further scrutiny.

We heard that the revenue budget proposals had been linked to the Single Integrated Plan, the Corporate Risk Assessment and the priorities of the Partnership Arrangement namely; to maintain direct spending in schools and maintenance of services to vulnerable children and adults as well as the continued provision of activities that support the creation of jobs and wealth in the local economy.

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. The residual gap had reduced from £2.4 million to £1million for 2014/15 and it was hoped that the second round of citizen consultation events would generate feedback regarding a larger increase in Council Tax and further potential saving proposals for pursual.

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, scrutinised at a previous meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee dated 20th January 2014 - continued

The Committee agreed to focus on elements which had been amended within the budget mandates and in so doing the following issues were raised:

• RC PRIMARY SCHOOL MEAL SERVICES

We heard that the Authority currently provides approximately 485 000 school meals per annum to 32 Primary Schools and Mounton House Special School. A saving of £206 000 was required in order to balance the budget for 2014 – 15.

The following service models were proposed to address this gap:

- Increase meal prices to £2 for Primary School meals and £3 excluding VAT for Adult meals from April 2014
- Reduce the number of cooking kitchens from 29 to 12 (Of the 32 primary schools served, 29 cook meals on site and 3 receive meals transported in from other schools). This would generate a saving of £100 000 per annum.

The Committee raised the possibility of amalgamating the school and community meal services to reduce costs and we were advised that Social Services had investigated this option. The Authority currently has three schools into which school meals are transported; Raglan, Llanfair and Thornwell. Thornwell would be restored to a cooking kitchen in the near future.

We were asked to note that the largest cost remained as staffing.

Having reviewed these proposals Members queried how the market would respond to an increase in the cost of school meals.

The Head of Achievement, Learning and Infrastructure informed the Committee that in September 2013 Welsh Government directed that all meals must be “Appetite for Life” compliant. This had increased the budget pressure from £156 000 to £206 000 due to the change in ingredients required to ensure compliance, this equated to an additional 10 pence per meal. Members were also asked to note that Appetite for Life Compliance forms part of the ESTYN Inspection Regime.

We were advised that schools were yet to be consulted regarding the price increase, but the increase was moderate in all Wales terms.

Feedback from public consultation events indicated that parents were willing to pay more for school meals provided that they were of a high quality and nutritionally balanced. We welcomed notice that there were plans to introduce taster sessions to encourage take up of school meals and school menus were being reviewed.

In response to a Member question regarding the take up rate of free school meals and potential discrimination, the Head of Achievement, Learning and Infrastructure believed that all pupils entitled to free school meals used this service and the Authority encouraged take – up through marketing.

With regard to the potential for discrimination, we were advised that pupils entitled to free school meals were not identified within schools.

We welcomed assurance that the school meal debt is and would continue to be monitored closely to ensure that those who are entitled to free school meals use their entitlement and to assess the impact of the proposed price increase.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee dated 20th January 2014 - continued

The Local Member for Trellech United referred to the Equality Impact Assessment and queried whether the gender impact should be “neutral” given that the majority of low income single families who would be affected by this change were matriarchal.

We resolved to support the proposal to increase meal prices to £2 for Primary School meals and £3 excluding VAT for Adult meals from April 2014.

• PASSENGER TRANSPORT UNIT POST 16

Members requested an update regarding amendments to the Home to School Transport Policy which would remove the non - statutory element of Post 16 travel grants and increase the charge for concessionary seats.

The Committee were advised that the Passenger Transport Unit were keen to undertake consultation and legal advice remained pending regarding the business case. We noted that Monmouthshire were in the process of considering a joint South East Wales Passenger Transport Policy to ensure a common and consistent policy.

Members expressed concern regarding the withdrawal of non - statutory post 16 transport particularly given the rurality of the County. Accessibility to transport should be maximised, even if the Authority is unable to provide the service free of charge.

The Committee resolved to support the proposed business case, based on current information and requested an update report regarding South East Wales Passenger Transport Arrangements to be received at a future meeting.

• CYP SCHOOL BUDGET

We noted that a net budget for the financial year 2013/14 of £43 392.41 had been awarded to schools. It was proposed that school budgets would remain at this level given that they had been inflated by 4.11% over the previous three years. This would mean a reduction to normal funding for a larger secondary school of approximately £50 000 and of £6057 for a 210 roll primary school. We noted that the financial impact upon individual schools would not be known until April 2014 at which time schools would set their budgets based on their formula allocation and the number of pupils on roll.

We were advised that the LEA could either direct Primary Schools which carry reserve balances greater than £50 000, (Secondary schools £100 000) to spend the excess or claw it back. We noted that mid – year there was a tendency for school budgets to fall, with a moderate increase at year end.

We received assurance that the School Finance Team would work closely with schools to identify budget savings as a feature of the mandate. It was acknowledged that schools may be required to access any reserve funding they may hold as a result of the mandate. £320 000 had been identified in the financial budget 2014/15 should restructuring or redundancy result.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee dated 20th January 2014 - continued

We resolved to support the mandate on the basis that schools were supported by the Authority and awareness was raised that the Authority was also required to make efficiency savings.

• CYP ALN CONTINGENCY IN ISB

The Committee revisited the Business Plan and did not support the original option to withdraw £150 000 from the ALN Contingency Budget given that small schools would be disproportionately disadvantaged by the proposal.

Members instead expressed support to reduce the contingency element of the ALN by £75 000 and to retain £141 493 to be administered by the SEN Panel to provide a pro - active in year response to changing circumstances. We welcomed the proposal to train specialists within schools to identify Specific Learning Difficulties rather than utilise external tutors.

We noted that that a Strategy Board made up of the Authority's head teachers had been established at which local decision making appeared to be favoured.

The Committee expressed a desire to raise awareness of Autism and to support continued engagement with Head teachers within the remit of the Children and Young People Select Committee, in order to monitor the direct impact of budget proposals on schools and pupils.

• SCHOOLS LIBRARY SERVICE

It was proposed that the Schools Literacy and Resource Centre would charge schools within Monmouthshire for the use of the service, which was previously subsidised by the Authority.

We received assurance that the service would be redesigned to allow ease of transition but it was acknowledged that the success of the proposal would be dependent upon school take up. Much work would be undertaken to promote the service to schools. Once school "buy – in" had been established consideration would be afforded to either rationalising or expanding the service.

We resolved to support the proposal.

• STAGED WITHDRAWAL OF SUPPORT FOR GWENT MUSIC SERVICE

Members expressed opposition to the proposed withdrawal of support for the Gwent Music Service given the value of the service to children's social skills and educational attainment and the national recognition the service had achieved.

We were advised that further work had been undertaken since the original budget mandate to consider alternative charging mechanisms and the numbers of Monmouthshire children using different aspects of the service to identify areas where cuts would have the least impact, such as reducing the number of instruments purchased. We were advised that there were seven options currently under consideration for implementation from September 2014.

The Chief Executive reminded Members that Council would set the budget on 27th February 2014 and that a saving of £50 000 would need to be made from Gwent

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select Committee dated 20th January 2014 - continued

Music Service, but the proposal to Council marked a step down in funding not a complete withdrawal

The Chief Executive acknowledged that the service was extremely valuable and informed Members that the Chief Officer, Children and Young People would be meeting with Gwent Music Service, which now only consisted of Monmouthshire County Council and Torfaen County Borough Council to agree a sustainable way forward.

The Committee requested full involvement with any staged withdrawal of the Gwent Music Service and expressed appreciation that Officers were currently assessing alternative options.

• REVIEW OF OTHER EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

We were advised that the Authority sought to save £170 000 on educational arrangements such as the Visually Impaired Service currently provided in partnership with other local Authorities.

The Authority would require confirmation that value for money was being achieved through an assessment of the number of Monmouthshire pupils using the service and a cost analysis of the potential of buying in services from other providers.

We resolved to monitor the proposed mandate closely.

• CHILDRENS SERVICES STAFF RESTRUCTURING

We resolved to adjourn discussion the mandate pending confirmation that a report regarding this had been approved by Cabinet. Members noted also that the report author had left the Authority.

• REVIEW AND TRANSFORMATION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES, SEN/ALN.

We were advised that the initial process to integrate and streamline all provision with the child and family as the core focus had been initiated and was approaching the start of month 2.

Members expressed the importance of consulting with stakeholders at all times.

Children and Young People Select Committee reaffirmed support of the Capital Budget Proposals with receipts ring fenced for the 21st Century School Programme but expressed concern regarding the cumulative impact of the budget mandates upon children, young people and their families and in particular the withdrawal of support for Gwent Music Service.

The Chairman expressed thanks to Members and Officers present.

The meeting ended at 15:35

**Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Select
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