

COMMUNITY & ADULT SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 FEBRUARY 2024

Present: Councillor Taylor (Chairperson)
Councillors Ahmed, Ash-Edwards, Lent, Lewis and McGarry

34 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs Boes and Littlechild.

35 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

36 : MINUTES

The minutes of the 11th December 2023 meeting were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

37 : DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2024-2027 & DRAFT BUDGETARY PROPOSALS 2024/25

The Chair advised Members that this item sought to provide Members with context for the scrutiny of the sections of the Council's draft Corporate Plan 2024–27 and draft Cabinet 2024/25 Budget Proposals relating to Directorates falling within the remit of this Committee.

The proposals were due to be considered by Cabinet on 29th February, before being considered by Council on 7th March.

For this item, the Chair welcomed:

Cllr Chris Weaver	Cabinet Member for Finance, Modernisation & Performance
Ian Allwood	Head of Finance
Chris Lee	Corporate Director, Resources

Corporate Overview

Cllr Weaver was invited to make a statement, in which he emphasised that this was the most challenging budget since he had been in his role. Despite a 4.3% increase in cash overall, £57m was needed to meet rising costs and pressures, in particular in education and adults' and children's services. The finance team had looked at making back office savings first of all, and were proposing to increase council tax by 6%, but there would be service changes too. It was important to balance supporting services, the council's long-term resilience and the cost of living crisis.

The finance officers delivered a presentation outlining the key themes, noting that the final local government finance settlement was expected on 27th February. The draft revenue budget for 2024/25 saw pressures of £57.535m, due to a combination of pay inflation, price inflation, commitments, realignments, demographic pressure and schools pressures.

The proposals included £10.47m efficiency savings and £2.38m corporate savings, along with £4.05m in savings from proposals which would have an impact on existing levels of service. They outlined the scope of the consultation undertaken, which had been both city-wide and with specific users of services.

The Chair invited questions, comments and observations from Members.

Members welcomed the scale of the response to the consultation response, and asked how this level of engagement could be maintained in the future. The Cabinet Member explained that Cardiff tended to get more responses than the other core cities thanks to extensive participation work throughout the year and promotion of the budget online as well as the provision of hard copies in public buildings. He noted that consultation levels fluctuated in part due to the nature of the proposed savings, and if there were a better settlement next year then this might lead to fewer responses.

Members explored how the consultation responses were weighted in line with the overall decision-making process, and heard that after the results were compiled, key themes were presented to Cabinet, taking into account which areas received the strongest feedback as this indicated which changes would have the biggest impact. The Cabinet Member emphasised the importance of consultation informing decisions in a meaningful way.

The Committee sought reassurance on the possible risks of the reduction in the Adult Services contingency budget, and heard that the general contingency fund had gradually decreased over the years and these funds invested in services instead. Officers added that overall growth of the Adult Services budget meant they didn't have a specific concern in this area.

Members explored the earmarked reserves and the question of how decisions were made regarding how much was used and what was left behind. Officers assured the Committee that a lot of this was done in tandem with the service area, and that there was constant monitoring and assessment of risks.

The Committee sought clarity on the implications for employees in terms of redeployments or redundancies, and heard that the expected total figure of 62 was still to be confirmed. Officers added that there was likely to be a mix of agency workers and short-term contracts in addition to FTE positions.

Members asked how the wider financial context, particularly the cost of living crisis, was balanced with the demands and pressures on services. The Cabinet Member reassured the Committee that there was constant iterative discussion throughout the budget process regarding the issues they wanted to address and what was

affordable. It was not an exact science, and full and rounded discussion was needed in every case before they settled on appropriate allocations and savings.

Adult Services, Housing & Communities Draft Proposals

The Cabinet Members were invited to make an opening statement on any budget proposals or details of the Corporate Plan relevant to their portfolio, before questions and comments from Members.

For this item, the Chair welcomed:

Cllr Julie Sangani	Cabinet Member for Tackling Poverty, Equality and Public Health (Public Health & Equalities)
Cllr Peter Bradbury	Cabinet Member for Tackling Poverty, Equality and Public Health (Tackling Poverty and Supporting Young People)
Cllr Norma Mackie	Cabinet Member for Social Services (Adults)
Cllr Lynda Thorne	Cabinet Member for Housing & Communities
Helen Evans	Assistant Director, Housing and Communities
Jane Thomas	Director of Adults, Housing and Communities
Sarah McGill	Corporate Director, People and Communities

Tackling Poverty, Equality and Public Health (Public Health & Equalities)

In her opening statement, Cllr Sangani highlighted the need to increase health support available to marginalised communities like refugees and asylum seekers, as well as rough sleepers.

The Chair invited questions, comments and observations from Members.

A key area of concern for the Committee related to support services for refugees and asylum seekers, which previous briefings had indicated were close to breaking point. Officers emphasised that managing these pressures was central to the budget proposals and Corporate Plan, and highlighted the importance of working in partnership with the UK and Welsh governments to deliver a cohesive approach. The Committee noted a lack of investment, both financially and in terms of resource, to address this issue, and highlighted the implications if applications for grant funding were to be unsuccessful.

Members asked how lessons learned from previous years would be applied, and heard that a dedicated team had been set up to work jointly with housing colleagues, seeking to ensure a connection with individual families and overcome a pressurised housing position. It was important to ensure that all the council's teams were working closely together to provide wraparound support, in particular regarding health and supporting people into gainful employment.

Tackling Poverty, Equality and Public Health (Tackling Poverty and Supporting Young People)

In his opening statement, Cllr Bradbury recalled that a lot of these issues had been central to last year's budget scrutiny process as well. The council had to be creative and consider all available funding possibilities, including the Shared Prosperity Fund, and had looked closely at staffing efficiencies. They had hit every target in the Corporate Plan so far, and now needed to stretch those targets without putting too much pressure on staff. They were also trying to maintain lines of communication opened during Covid.

The Chair invited questions, comments and observations from Members.

Members welcomed the increased targets for the advice team but cautioned about the possible impact of staffing changes on these new demand pressures. Officers clarified that many of the posts they were getting rid of had been vacant for some time, and they had restructured to account for the loss of other positions.

The Committee discussed long-term pressures as the cost of living crisis continued to entrench people in difficulty. The Cabinet Member agreed that this had significantly increased demand for advice hubs, and the targets had been raised to match that, but naturally he hoped the crisis would ease which would lead to a decrease in demand. He felt that change was needed on a national level to get money into people's pockets and narrow the gap.

Officers acknowledged that reduced funding across support schemes made it harder to offer practical support but assured the Committee that the advice team had their finger on the pulse about all the opportunities available and how best to apply for them. Returning to work was crucial, with an emphasis on good, well-paid employment to provide stability.

Social Services (Adults)

In her opening statement, Cllr Mackie noted that an Ask Cardiff survey had identified supporting vulnerable adults and old people as a top three priority. The council wanted to ensure that people could live well as they aged, staying independent, active and connected to their communities. Key aspects of this were disabled adaptations and increased digital sessions, as well as working closely with health colleagues and reducing demand through effective social prescribing. They aimed to deliver high quality and sustainable care while addressing workforce needs and meeting demands on the service. She added that a neurodivergent-friendly strategy was being developed in order to meet the diverse needs of Cardiff residents.

Officers gave a presentation on proposed charges for social care, which had not been reviewed for some time. The cost per hour of domiciliary care (£10.21) had stayed the same for many years, and Cardiff charged significantly less than any other local authority in Wales, with only a few charging less than £20 per hour. It was proposed that hourly fees would increase to £22.36, phased over two years with an increase to £16.38 from April 2024. The Welsh government capped fees at £100 per week but this was currently under review.

Officers reiterated that nobody would be charged more than they could afford according to a financial assessment, and outlined the consultation responses, which indicated that more than half of respondents agreed that the charge for homecare should increase, and 75% supported the phasing of the increase. The initial impact assessment suggested that 313 service users would be affected by the increase to £16.38/hour, mainly older people.

The Chair invited questions, comments and observations from Members.

The Committee sought clarity on exact costs for domiciliary care and heard that the complexity of the calculations depending on individual circumstances. Officers clarified that the £300k projected saving would be achieved across two years as the phased increase was implemented.

Members explored the focus on moving individuals from residential accommodation into supported living, and were reassured that nobody would be forced to move if they didn't want to. Officers added that the move to supported living, such as the new housing association flats in Llanishen with on-site support, could be a major step in many individuals' journey.

Members asked how achievable the savings in this area were, and heard that a lot of them related to recommissioning, so the key concern was timing rather than achievability.

The Committee noted that a number of proposals related to the Community Response Team, which was already under significant pressure. Officers confirmed that the savings here related to the back office, with a wider review taking place at the same time.

Members welcomed the development of a neurodivergence strategy and praised the pursuit of new projects in uncertain times, but queried how this would be achieved without a funding allocation attached. The Cabinet Member compared it to the approach to Age Friendly Cardiff, where they had encouraged businesses and employers to work with the council and set up an all-party group too. It did not cost anything to take into account how to deal with people with specific needs.

Housing & Communities

In her opening statement, Cllr Thorne stated that she was proud of their progress in tackling homelessness and supporting vulnerable people into accommodation in recent years, but there was greater pressure than ever on these services, and this had led to the declaration of a housing emergency in 2023. The Corporate Plan outlined how they intended to tackle this, focusing on homelessness prevention and developing quality temporary accommodation. The Gasworks scheme in Grangetown was nearing completion, and they were developing specialised accommodation for older people, allowing tenants to downsize and freeing up family homes. She stressed that investing in existing homes was just as important as building new ones, and they were continuing to use modular extensions to prevent overcrowding, ensuring homes were as energy-efficient as possible, and implementing new KPIs for the responsive repairs team.

Officers gave a presentation on proposed savings across Hubs and libraries for 2024/25. These included amending Hub opening and closing times, streamlining the mobile library service to focus on housebound residents, increased use of volunteers and the removal of hard copies of newspapers and periodicals from some libraries. The reduced opening hours were intended to have the least impact on users, and it would revert to the previous hours twice a week to maintain flexibility and accessibility. The reduced hours would allow for four currently vacant posts to be deleted.

Officers added that a consultation focusing on users and local residents would run from 18th March to 8th April. The results would be evaluated in mid-April and implemented on 20th May, giving users a month's notice of any changes. They added that the paper newspapers and periodicals would be replaced with press readers allowing users to access them online for free, and clarified that the Mobile Library Service no longer provided a regular service due to the vehicle used being very old and unreliable, so it would instead use a smaller vehicle that just delivered books to housebound residents. They would also increase the use of volunteers, although this would be done by not recruiting to certain posts when people left so the savings would not be immediate.

The Chair invited questions, comments and observations from Members.

The Committee queried the ratio of volunteers to staff across hubs and asked at what point the lack of experienced permanent staff might be an issue. Officers explained that there tended to be 25 to 30 volunteers for each Volunteer Mentor, and it was working very well at the moment although they were mindful of monitoring any negative impact in addition to the positive aspects of volunteering, such as skills development.

Members sought clarity on the directorate's revenue budget, noting the £1.2m in extra costs and huge ongoing demand for housing, and were reassured that officers were confident they could meet the need, and that one of the team's key strengths was securing grant funding. Upcoming schemes like the Gasworks would allow them to house people in a more cost-effective way.

The Committee explored the achievability of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, and heard that this was expected to be a significant challenge. There was no particular funding allocation attached to it yet as it was unclear exactly how much it would cost. Cardiff was currently the only local authority that met Welsh accommodation standards, and surveying all their properties to find out what needed doing to meet the new standard could take years. Members acknowledged and welcomed investment in council house repairs within the Corporate Plan.

AGREED: that the Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, writes to the Cabinet Members conveying the observations of the Committee when discussing the way forward.

38 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

There were none.

39 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING

18th March, 4:30pm.

The meeting terminated at 12.00 pm.