

POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Councillor Walker(Chairperson)
Councillors Ahmed, Berman, Bowen-Thomson, Cowan,
Henshaw, Mackie and Williams

37 : APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Cllr Lister.

38 : DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

39 : MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

40 : GOVERNANCE & LEGAL SERVICES

Members were advised that this report follows Committee's comments when monitoring the Council's budget at two recent scrutiny meetings (June & September 2021). Members highlighted concerns relating to the Governance and Legal Service and how the budget was supporting the service. A briefing note and a deep dive opportunity had been requested to examine and gain a better understanding of the service demands and budget challenges faced by the Directorate to usefully inform 2022/23 budget discussions.

The Chairperson drew Member's attention to an exempt Appendix. Appendix 6 to Appendix A is not for publication as it contains exempt information of the description in paragraph 12 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. It is a part of the papers because it illustrates the complexities of a demand-based service, and this is useful in the context of understanding the challenges faced by the service. If Members need to refer to this Appendix specifically in their questioning, then it would be necessary to go into closed session.

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Huw Thomas, Leader of Cardiff Council; Davina Fiore, Director of Governance & Legal; Gary Jones, Head of Democratic Services; Sheila Davies, Operational Manager Community; Leanne Weston, Solicitor; Ian Allwood, Head of Finance and Councillor Mike Jones-Pritchard, Chair of the Democratic Services Committee.

The Chairperson invited the Leader to make a statement after which Officers provided Committee with a presentation and Members were invited to ask questions and make comments/observations;

Members asked whether charging internal clients was an option that was being considered. Officers advised that in Cardiff Council the Legal Service holds the

budget, to charge internally would constitute a type of trading account. Officers added that there are pros and cons to each method of charging. Officers were cognisant of their responsibility of ensuring that the Council has full and timely legal advice and would continue with the current method of charging and budgeting.

Members noted the challenge presented by a lack of social workers, the cost of bringing in agency staff and the knock on effect this can have on the legal services budget in terms of court cases etc. Members asked if a cost benefit analysis or an invest to save intervention was needed. Officers explained that this had already been done and ongoing training was being provided. It was noted that there was a national issue with social worker shortages, but there had been investment and a lot of work undertaken in this area.

Members asked if the Council was funding Children's Services appropriately as the service was often overspent and also asked if there was any correlation between that overspend and the legal services budget. Officers explained that the Directorate feel they are accurate predictions however due to Covid there has been a level of build up and increased pressures including some very complex cases.

Members referred to the difficulty in recruiting solicitors and Officers assured Members that they have increased the resources of the Community Team and currently have four trainee solicitors.

Members noted the small litigation team and that there could potentially be issues if staff were off work.

RESOLVED: The Committee AGREED that the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Members on behalf of the Committee to convey their comments and observations.

41 : BUDGET MONITORING MONTH 6 2021/22

Members were reminded that the Committee has responsibility for scrutiny of the Council's financial planning, policy and control of its budget throughout the year. That means monitoring the whole Council's financial position.

The Chairperson welcomed Cllr Chris Weaver, Cabinet Member, Finance, Modernisation & Performance; Chris Lee, Corporate Director, Resource and Ian Allwood, Head of Finance to the meeting.

The Chairperson invited Cllr Weaver to make a statement after which Officers provided Committee with a presentation and Members were invited to ask questions and make comments/observations;

Members referred to the overspends in various service areas and asked if the contingency would be used to balance the budget. Officers explained that they monitor closely service area budgets. At the moment they are making some presumptions as they cannot guarantee that all claims made to the Welsh Government Hardship Fund would be accepted. A discussion took place around School Catering income which had decreased by 40% and had led to an increased claim to the Hardship Fund.

Members sought clarity about Commissioning Care overspend in Adult Services being offset by Internal Services underspend. Officers explained this underspend refers to grant funding in relation to assessment care management and older people enablement. Officers added that this grant funding is being taken into account but closely monitored throughout the year.

Members asked about the rate of Council Tax Collections. Officers stated that Cardiff's collection rate was high compared to the rest of Wales as a whole; there would be a Council Tax Base report to Cabinet in December and the 98% target for Council Tax collection would remain the same although Officers did anticipate that the rate may drop as a result of the reduction in Universal Credit.

Members were concerned about the loss of income in Quarter 1 of £4.8million. Officers assured Members that Quarter 2 looks better but there were more hardship claims in a number of areas, which cannot be guaranteed until they hear back from Welsh Government.

With reference to the Planning and Transport Directorate, Members noted the Solar Farm overspend, a reduced income predicted and that it was unlikely to be able to claim from the hardship fund for the reduction in Civil Enforcement income. Officers explained that a business model was in place for the Solar Farm, they were confident going forward but would continue to monitor this.

Members noted that the overspends in Children's Services had been happening for a number of years and asked when this situation was likely to change. Officers explained that there are significant challenges with the Children's Services budget and this has been the case for a number of years; challenges such as the number of children, number of places available etc. Officers stressed that contingency is therefore vital in providing the service but they do look at trends. Officers added that the pandemic had increased demand on the service.

RESOLVED: The Committee AGREED that the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Members on behalf of the Committee to convey their comments and observations.

42 : CORPORATE PROPERTY STRATEGY 2021-26

The Chairperson explained that this Committee has responsibility for scrutiny of the Council's property estate. The Council is in the process of updating its Corporate Property Strategy for the next 5 years. The plan is to take this strategy to Cabinet in December and therefore the Committee has an opportunity for policy development scrutiny of the Strategy.

The Chairperson welcomed Cllr Russell Goodway, Cabinet Member, Investment & Development; Neil Hanratty, Director of Economic Development and Donna Jones, Assistant Director County Estates to the meeting.

Cllr Goodway gave apologies due to work commitments and the Chairperson invited Officers to make a statement followed by a presentation and Members were invited to ask questions and make comments/observations;

Members referred to One Planet Cardiff and asked Officers to explain how they would ensure that this links with the Corporate Strategy and how they would assess the Carbon impact of Council decisions on property matters. Officers stated that more detail on this would be included in the final Strategy, however, a business case would be needed for any new property which would have to include One Planet Cardiff aspirations and a full analysis of costs. Committee was keen to ensure that this information be in the public domain, including all options costed out clearly.

Members asked if there were any plans to examine all historic buildings across Cardiff. Officers explained that they were developing a list of buildings, looking at stone maintenance and costs of repair etc; the Strategy would make reference to all of the buildings and there was likely to be a Capital Bid for the works.

A discussion took place around Hybrid working and Members were interested to know what likely square foot reduction could be made in terms of property assets from the introduction of hybrid working. Officers stated this was still at an early stage and this type of detail was not available as yet, they added that Committee would receive confidential papers next month which would detail condition surveys for both County Hall and City Hall, this would provide the information needed to develop and outline business case.

RESOLVED: The Committee AGREED that the Chairperson writes to the Cabinet Members on behalf of the Committee to convey their comments and observations.

43 : COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Members were reminded that at the October meeting of Committee Members were invited to express an interest in participating in the Joint Scrutiny Inquiry of the Replacement Local Development Plan. Councillors Norma Mackie and Joel Williams were subsequently nominated as representatives for the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee. The task group has met and the draft Terms of Reference and approach that the Joint Task group will be taking were attached to Members papers.

The Chairperson explained that Committee's Performance Panel has a growing remit in light of the new arrangements to address the Local Government (Elections) Wales Act and volunteers had been invited to participate alongside the Chairs of all 5 scrutiny committees. There is a meeting of the Panel with the Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance and Chief Executive to scrutinise the mid-year performance report on Monday 6th December 2021 at 1pm. Members were invited to attend if they so wished.

44 : URGENT ITEMS (IF ANY)

None received.

45 : DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 14 DECEMBER 2021, 4.30PM

The meeting terminated at 6.50 pm