

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14 OCTOBER 2021

Minutes of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held remotely on Thursday, 14 October 2021

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Sean Bibby, Geoff Collett, Mared Eastwood, Patrick Heesom, Richard Jones, Kevin Rush, Paul Shotton, Andy Williams and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor: Joe Johnson (for Richard Lloyd)

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts - Leader and Cabinet Member for Education, Councillor Billy Mullin - Deputy Leader (Governance) and Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets, Councillor Paul Johnson - Cabinet Member for Finance, Social Value & Procurement, Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Housing and Assets), Chief Officer (Governance), Corporate Finance Manager, Strategic Finance Manager and Finance Manager

For minute number 40

Mr. John Gittins, H.M. Senior Coroner for North Wales (East and Central)

IN ATTENDANCE: Head of Democratic Services and Democratic Services Officer

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

37. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2021 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Geoff Collett and Andy Williams.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record.

38. ACTION TRACKING

The Head of Democratic Services presented the update report on progress with actions arising from previous meetings.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Shotton and Richard Jones.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

39. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Democratic Services presented the updated forward work programme for consideration.

Councillor Richard Jones referred to joint care packages discussed at the July meeting and said that the request for details of the amount lost to the Council over a reasonable period of time had not yet been actioned. He also sought confirmation on whether a letter had been sent to the Health Board seeking to address inequality in the appeal process for decisions on joint funded care packages.

The Chief Executive said that case determination of such care packages was a long-standing complex subject with significant cost implications, on which the Council had engaged extensively with the Health Board. He said that a commitment had previously been given by the Health Board to review the system and that a re-review was required. He suggested that the Committee may wish to request that officers seek an urgent private meeting with the Chief Executive of the Health Board to review process and outcomes, with a full report submitted to this Committee and the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Jones spoke about the financial implications for the Council and said that projected contributions from the Health Board should not be included in the budget until the appeals process was completed. He proposed the suggestion made by the Chief Executive and asked that the report, incorporating the information requested in July, be brought back to the Committee in November/December. He was seconded by Councillor Arnold Woolley.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be approved, as varied at the meeting;
- (b) That the Chief Executive contact the Chief Executive of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, seeking an urgent review meeting into the shortfall in joint funded packages, caused by the Health Board's decisions on funding. A report on this, incorporating resolution 16(c) from the meeting on 8 July 2021, be brought back to this Committee and the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee in November/December 2021; and
- (b) That the Head of Democratic Services, in consultation with the Committee Chairman, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises.

40. WORK OF THE CORONER'S OFFICE

The Chief Officer (Governance) introduced a report on the role of the Coroner for North Wales (East and Central) and the work undertaken on behalf of Councils in Conwy, Denbighshire, Wrexham and Flintshire.

Mr. John Gittins, H.M. Senior Coroner for North Wales East and Central, was in attendance to give a presentation covering:

- The North Wales (East and Central) (Coroner's District) Order 2012
- Independent Judicial Officer
- Statistics
- Support
- The Law
- The 'Crossroads'
- Investigation
- The Inquest
- Powers of Coroner - Schedule 5 / Consequences
- Prevention of future deaths
- Some positives...and some fortuitous timings
- Other jobs and responsibilities
- "Where does it end?"

The presentation highlighted the wide range of legislative powers and responsibilities held by the Coroner which was a historical position funded by local authorities on a statutory basis. Information was also shared on the Coroner's power to issue reports under Regulation 28 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013 which required organisations, including local authorities, to respond and take action to reduce the risk of future deaths. Reference was made to the Chief Executive's work in supporting the Coroner's office during the emergency situation.

The Chief Executive commended Mr. Gittins for his presentation and for the way in which he carried out his role.

In response to questions from Members, Mr. Gittins clarified the scope of his legal responsibilities.

The Chief Officer (Governance) said the recommendation for the Committee to receive future annual reports from the Coroner would provide an opportunity to consider performance and the pressures involved in the service.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Mr. Gittins for his informative presentation which was well received.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Richard Jones and Mared Eastwood.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee thanks the Coroner for his work and receives further reports on an annual basis.

41. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY / BUDGET 2022/23 - STAGE 2 - OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY RESPONSES

The Chief Executive presented a report to consider the outcome of consultation with Overview & Scrutiny Committees on the 2022/2023 budget proposals, to enable the Committee to respond accordingly to Cabinet. He thanked all the Committee Members, Chairs and Cabinet Members for their contributions and support during this process.

The report contained feedback from three of the Committees and a verbal update was given on the remaining two which had met subsequently. All had supported the cost pressures within their respective portfolios and had identified no further cost efficiency opportunities. The two issues arising were the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee seeking further details on the allocation of the proposed £1m investment in schools and the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee requesting careful monitoring of open risks.

The Head of Democratic Services confirmed that the consultation had fulfilled constitutional requirements and that the report to Cabinet had been updated to reflect the completion of this stage of the budget.

The Corporate Finance Manager provided an update on four recent key changes impacting on the Council's budget estimate:

- Pay award estimates to reflect the current position on national negotiations - 1.75% for the current year on a recurring basis for next year plus 1% from 2022/23
- National Insurance increase - just over £1.4m
- Increase in Members' allowance (as recommended by the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales) - £0.184m
- Various deferred pressures as non-essential or funded through alternative grants - total increased to just over £18m

On budget solutions, the projected achievable efficiency target of £2m had been revised to £1.25m. An uplift of 5.75% in Revenue Support Grant would be required to support all cost pressures identified, which was in line with the financial case made by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

The Chief Executive said that current national negotiations on the non-teachers' pay award indicated the estimate was likely to be higher and that Ministerial discussions through the WLGA continued.

In response to questions from Councillor Richard Jones, the Chief Executive clarified that the National Insurance estimate included provision for Aura Wales, Newydd Catering & Cleaning and Theatr Clwyd. The national evidential case by the WLGA was considered a realistic estimate to inform national decision-making. An insufficient Settlement would require review of non-essential cost pressures and associated risks, given that the budget estimate had been supported with no scope for further efficiencies.

Councillor Ian Roberts said that Welsh Government decisions would be influenced by the forthcoming budget statement by the Chancellor.

Councillor Paul Johnson thanked all Overview & Scrutiny Members for their contributions and challenge to the budget process.

Councillor Richard Jones paid tribute to the Chief Executive's role in developing the Medium Term Financial Strategy which had proved to be a useful tool in financial planning. The Chief Executive said that this was a team effort involving Members, the Chief Officer Team and Finance officers.

The recommendation, which was amended to reflect the debate, was moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Shotton and Richard Jones.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee commends the Overview & Scrutiny responses to budget consultation to the Cabinet; and
- (b) That the Chief Executive be thanked for developing and leading the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy process.

42. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2021/22 (MONTH 5)

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced the report on the 2021/22 Month 5 position for Revenue Budget Monitoring prior to consideration by Cabinet, which included the outcome of the review of service reserves and balances requested by the Committee in July.

The Finance Manager reported that on the Council Fund, the projected year-end position - without new actions to reduce cost pressures and/or improve the financial return on efficiency planning and cost control - was an operating surplus of £0.182m (excluding the impact of the pay award to be met from reserves), leaving a contingency reserve balance of £5.875m at year-end. This favourable movement was mainly due to the allocation of Welsh Government (WG) Social Care Recovery Grant funding in Social Services and Out of County Placements.

Amongst the in-year risks, there was an improvement in Council Tax collection levels and demand for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme was being monitored as the end of the furlough scheme approached.

An update was given on the achievement of planned in-year efficiencies, earmarked and un-marked reserves, together with the emergency funding position which identified risks from changes to eligibility criteria. The ongoing review of reserves and service balances had identified £0.585m to be recommended for release back into general Contingency Reserves.

On the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), a projected overspend of £0.633m would leave a closing un-earmarked balance of £3.839m, which was above the recommended guidelines on spend.

Councillor Paul Shotton asked about the impact of inflationary costs and Universal Credit changes upon the homelessness situation. The Finance Manager said that the Housing Support Grant was amongst those subject to changes in eligibility and would be maximised to support individuals.

The Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) advised that various pressures on the homelessness situation were being closely monitored in anticipation of further demand on the service. Updates were regularly reported to the Community, Housing & Assets Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

In response to questions from Councillor Richard Jones, the Chief Executive said that distance controls were being phased out according to risk assessments and in consultation with Trade Unions, also that a number of services would incur ongoing costs after the Hardship Fund had ceased. On the risk around pay awards, it was clarified that whilst the teachers' in-year pay award was settled, negotiations for non-teachers' pay at UK level remained open and were beyond the Council's control.

In response to the questions, the Corporate Finance Manager reminded Members of the latest position on pay awards - reported verbally in the previous item - which would be updated for the next monthly report. The Finance Manager agreed to include more detail in the Month 6 report on the risks arising from changes to the Hardship Fund.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Shotton and Geoff Collett.

RESOLVED:

That having considered the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2021/22 (Month 5) report, the Committee confirms that there are no specific issues to be raised with Cabinet.

43. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 11.40am)

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Chairman