

DRAFT SCRUTINY COMMENTS – EXTRACT FROM DRAFT MINUTES
(FOR OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE – 3 FEBRUARY 2023)

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - PEOPLE

2023-24 Budget and Mid Term Financial Plan

The Assistant Head of Finance gave a brief overview.

Questions

A member questioned why the forecast for inflation is higher than has previously been anticipated for the next coming years.

- The Assistant Head of Finance noted that inflation is forecast in recognition that it is still likely to be higher than in the previous year. The Assistant Head of Finance added that the issue of high inflation will be compounded beyond a single year as there will likely be further cost increases and funding decreases.

A member asked whether there had been any consultations with the schools regarding proposals.

- The Assistant Head of Finance informed the member that an overview of the budget was given to schools and members of the unions in the prior week at the School Budget Forum. This forum includes a wide cross-section of stakeholders that will formally input to the consultation if they wish, however any school or individual can also add to the consultation as part of the process.

The member followed on to ask about the different pressures faced by schools such as energy costs increases, and if any in-year budget gaps would be remunerated.

- The Assistant Head of Finance noted these points were also discussed in the aforementioned School Budget Forum. Schools understand which elements are being funded in the proposals, and which would be absorbed by schools. These in-year increases would not be remunerated, however Cabinet would decide on the costs that will be met on an ongoing basis.

A member asked if Heads of Service could give context regarding the expected impact of the proposals for residents in Newport.

- The Strategic Director of Social Services outlined that there will inevitably be impacts from savings proposed, but the focus is to ameliorate the impact of these savings that we need to make whilst working as effectively as we possibly can.

Investment Proposals:

A member queried the funding gap in relation to the Aspire Project.

The Head of Prevention and Inclusion detailed the plans to remodel and re-establish the aspire project to progress from the current legacy arrangement, and to make it more secure by identifying funding streams with Education. Currently, there is an ad-hoc arrangement between education and youth service but that there needs to be a more robust arrangement in place including looking at an alternative provider who can oversee the contract in its entirety, rather than the current ad-hoc arrangement.

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A member asked for more information about the proposal concerning Additional Learning Need staff, and how this would affect ALN places in Newport schools.

- The Assistant Head of Education informed the member that funding is sourced through grants however it is unclear how much they grant funding will be available in the next year

A member asked if there was a reduction of ALN places, then where those children would be placed.

- The Assistant Head of Education confirmed that there were no plans to reduce ALN places.

A member asked for clarification regarding the Housing Benefit technical overpayments.

- The Assistant Head of Finance informed committee that this was due to exceeding accepted threshold levels of errors in claims to the DWP, and there had to be some planning done to ensure funds were available to meet costs where thresholds were exceeded. The Assistant Head of Finance assured members that there is work ongoing to try and stay within the thresholds, but some things are not always within the Council's control.

A member asked whether underfunding had caused an issue.

- The Assistant Head of Finance explained that the requirement to house everyone was expensive when resources such as bed and breakfasts had to be used to meet increasing demands on the service. The Assistant Head of Finance noted that historically, the DWP funding received does not cover the full costs of housing people, which leads to a gap in funding accommodation, particularly for temporary accommodation. The Assistant Head of Finance highlighted that this was not a new pressure, but the gap between Local Housing Allowances set by the DWP, and the true costs in housing people is something that needs addressing. There was some additional assistance during covid, but these high costs of emergency housing remain.
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A member asked what was being done to reduce the threshold below the £600,000.

The Assistant Head of Finance confirmed that the benefits section has moved and there will be changes to arrangements. There is a lot of work going in to manage the budget pressure through improvement of processes. The team are under extreme pressure as they are also administering lots of grants and schemes over and above the HB claims.

A member asked if the Heads of Service work with Newport City Homes to tackle the pressures of temporary housing.

- The Strategic Director explained that the service does work in partnership with Registered Social Landlords, and private landlords on strategic approaches, but also in day to day work. This is relevant in Education, Social Services, Housing and more. These relationships do exist.

The Chair noted a lag in the DWP funding being paid to housing and benefit services, and asked that more information on this be provided to committee.

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The Head of Adult Services wanted to highlight the importance in the range of partnerships that are there to make sure as peoples needs develop that they are able to keep them in their homes, which is an effective preventative approach to homelessness.

Savings Proposals:

CS2324/04 - Oaklands and short break provision remodelling

A member asked what the impact would be for children, fosterers and wider service in Newport due to the proposed savings for Oaklands respite support.

- The Head of Children's Services noted that the intention is to minimise the impact on the service by reducing, not ceasing to provide the service. It was noted that Social Service will explore other options for funding if and when possible to seek to re-introduce higher levels of provisions. The service is reducing rather than closing, if other monies become available, for example through WG, then the provision would be revised accordingly. The Head of Children's Services acknowledged that there would be an impact, and explained that it would be a needs led service in future.

A member expressed concern regarding the reduction in short break services, and another committee member commented that the service was a lifeline for some service users, therefore the service should not be stopped.

A member commented that the reduction of service provided by Oaklands would lead to higher cost pressures in other areas where some children may have to go into full time care, and these displayed costs could also impact on health services.

A member asked what the centre provision would look like in the best-case scenario, and whether volunteers be considered to sustain current levels of service.

- The Head of Children's Services informed the committee that the proposal is proposal isn't to close Oaklands, but to reduce the offer in terms of number of nights available. These are a highly skilled workforce offering an expert level of care, so any volunteers would need to be qualified to this level in order to support effectively. The Head of Children's Service noted the proposal was Monday to Thursday provision from 19 places to 11.
- The Chair noted that it was 21 to 11 places.

The committee expressed strong concerned on the impact on residents due to the reduction of services in the Oaklands and short break services savings proposal. The committee were concerned about the impact not only directly on the residents who accessed this service, but the residents who were able to foster with the assistance of this service and felt that it could have an impact on the number of foster carers within Newport. The committee also felt that there would be long term financial impact due to increasing pressures in other areas such as the care service and the health service. The committee recommended that this be reviewed and reconsidered.

CS2324/05 - Staffing across Children's Services

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A member asked what was meant in terms of reduction of staff.

- The Head of Children’s Services informed the committee that vacancies would be removed as the first option, as part of the Council’s job security policy.
- The Strategic Director was confident that this saving could be achieved in this way.

AS2324/01 - Adult contracts; commissioned services

A member expressed the importance of the Growing Space service for residents in Newport, and questioned what would happen to the Growing Spaces partnership.

- The Head of Adult Services noted that a considerable contribution was made to the partnership by the Council, which was proposed to be reduced. The Head of Adult Services informed committee that the service would be continued through other funding streams with a reduced contribution from the Council. The Head of Adult Services confirmed that the service would continue but on a reduced level.
- The member questioned whether the service would be able to continue working from Tredegar House.
- The Head of Adult services confirmed that this would be the decision of Growing Space as it would continue to operate with a change in capacity.

A member noted that meetings had been held in which the impact of cuts to Growing Space funding were presented.

A member asked for clarification regarding the financing for Growing Space and whether the Council could assist the charity in securing additional funding to bridge any gaps.

- The Head of Adult Service noted that it was not an easy proposal to put forward but the Council were looking to mitigate the proposal, such as through relationships with mental health services. The Head of Adult Services informed the committee that this would be supported going forward in relation to helping them securing further grant funding where possible.

The committee stressed the importance of supporting local initiatives.

The committee stressed the importance of Growing Spaces and strongly raised its concern the impact that limiting the service would have on residents who need to access these services. The committee further raised concern on the impact reducing the service would have on future finances and services such as the health and care sectors. The committee recommended that these cuts be reviewed and reconsidered.

AS2324/04 - Short breaks service for older adults (formerly known as day opportunities)

A member felt that a £500,000 reduction in funding would have a severe impact on the short breaks service.

A member asked for clarification as to whether this was in reference to Spring Gardens.

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- The Head of Adult Services confirmed it was regarding the Annex of Spring Gardens, not the residential home.
- A member asked whether that part of Spring Gardens would be closing all together.
- The Head of Adult Services informed committee that they would look to mitigate by potentially using part of the residential home or something else. The Head of Adult Services reminded committee that this was out to consultation for public commentary.

A member asked how carers will be supported after these cuts.

- The Head of Adult Service assured committee that they would continue to work with carers and all those attending short breaks as they have a right to a service. The Head of Adult Services informed committee that mitigation would be done by going back to look at how else the people currently using the service could be supported individually.

A member emphasised that they believe that residents will suffer heavily as a result of these cuts.

- The Strategic Director of Social Services assured committee that everyone is working to make savings in the face of difficult circumstances, whilst understanding that these changes will have an impact. The Strategic Director acknowledged the difficulty in this proposal but emphasised that work was done with families on an individual level to ensure that the care and support needed would be provided.

The committee were very concerned about the saving proposal regarding the short breaks service for older adults (formerly known as day opportunities). The committee felt that the reduction would have a severe impact on the service and all those who access it. The committee recommended that this be reviewed and reconsidered as the saving proposal was too large.

EDU2324/05 - Educational Psychology Savings Proposal

A member asked if there were enough educational psychologists.

- The Assistant Head of Education noted that there is a shortage of educational psychologists nationally. The Assistant Head of Education acknowledged whilst this proposal would have an impact on output, for example, preventative work, there is enough staff capacity remaining to complete statutory requirements.

The Chair asked that if schools require additional services how was this achieved.

- The Assistant Head of Education informed the committee that there is a team of educational psychologists on staff, but that individual schools could seek help further afield if they had the funds to do so.

Fees and Charges

A member questioned what the justification was for raising costs.

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- The Strategic Director informed committee that these were directly linked to the cost of services due to inflation.
- The Strategic Director assured the committee that for most service users, these increased costs would not be reflected in what they pay.

6. Conclusion of Committee Reports

The committee appreciated that there were hard decisions to be made given the current climate.

The committee asked for further information explaining the lag between costs incurred and DWP payments received by the Council be provided.

The committee stressed the importance of Growing Spaces and strongly raised its concern on the impact of limiting the service would have on residents who need to access these services. The committee further raised concern on the impact reducing the service would have on future finances and services such as the health and care sectors. The committee recommended that these cuts be reviewed and reconsidered.

The committee expressed strong concern on the impact on residents due to the reduction of services in the Oaklands and short break services savings proposal. The committee were concerned about the impact not only directly on the residents who accessed this service, but on foster carers who played an important role with the assistance of this service and felt that it could have a detrimental impact on the number of foster carers within Newport. The committee also felt that there would be a resulting financial impact due to increasing pressures in other areas such as care services and the health service. The committee recommended that this be reviewed and reconsidered.

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