

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Tuesday, 20 February 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Jason McLellan, Leader and Lead Member for Economic Growth and Tackling Deprivation; Gill German, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Education, Children and Families; Gwyneth Ellis, Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets; Elen Heaton, Lead Member for Health and Social Care; Julie Matthews, Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities; Barry Mellor, Lead Member for the Environment and Transport; Win Mullen-James, Lead Member for Local Development and Planning, Rhys Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities, and Emrys Wynne, Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage

Observers: Councillors Bobby Feeley, Karen Edwards, Jon Harland, Alan James, Gareth Sandilands, and Andrea Tomlin

ALSO PRESENT

Chief Executive (GB); Corporate Directors: Social Services and Education (NS), Governance and Business/Monitoring Officer (GW), and Environment and Economy TW; Heads of Service: Finance and Audit (LT) and Housing and Communities Service (LG); Lead Officer for Housing Property (MC) and Committee Administrators (KEJ & SJ [Webcaster])

POINT OF NOTICE

Unfortunately, the Simultaneous Translator had been unavoidably delayed and therefore simultaneous translation facilities for the meeting would commence once she arrived.

1 APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declaration of interest had been raised.

3 URGENT MATTERS

No urgent matters had been raised.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 23 January 2024 were submitted.

Matters Arising – Page 7, Item 5: Outcome of Communities Scrutiny Committee's Review of Cabinet's Decision relating to the Library/One Stop Shop Savings

Proposal – in response to a question from Councillor Gwyneth Ellis, Councillor Emrys Wynne confirmed that work to progress the commitments made in relation to the way forward for the library/one stop shop service had commenced. An informal meeting had taken place with officers to discuss the work of the taskforce and a formal meeting would be held in April to start the process which included monitoring the impact of cutting the opening hours and library usage, alternative delivery models and provision together with any additional opportunities to increase income and maximise the use of library buildings. Ultimately, that work would result in a new Library Strategy.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2024 be received and confirmed as a correct record.

5 COUNCIL HOUSING VOIDS REFURBISHMENT FRAMEWORK

Councillor Rhys Thomas presented the report seeking Cabinet approval for the re-tendering of the Council's Housing Voids Refurbishment Framework.

The Housing Service managed approximately 3,480 tenanted properties with around 250 properties becoming void annually (empty while new tenants were allocated). Those properties were refurbished to the new lettable standard resulting in expenditure in excess of £4m per annum. The current framework had been authorised by Cabinet in 2018 to reduce cost and time spent on void housing works whilst maintaining quality standards. The second iteration of the framework had been designed to continue those improvements. The report included details of the framework and specifications including a 60/40 quality/price weighting with an expected value of £16m over four years and tenders split into 4 lots.

The Head of Housing and Communities Service and Lead Officer for Housing Property attended for this item. Cabinet was advised that void properties provided an ideal opportunity to undertake refurbishment works. However, the relatively small turnover of tenants, with some having lived in properties for decades before they were vacated, could result in some major refurbishment works required. There was also a need for works to be carried out as quickly as possible given the loss of rental income whilst properties were unoccupied, and the need to work to the new mandated Welsh Housing Quality Standards (WHQS) going forward. The framework provided an excellent opportunity to provide steady work for local contractors and expand their experience/abilities to meet modern housing needs.

Cabinet had been pleased to note that having nominated local contractors working with Denbighshire over the framework's lifetime had resulted in improved service delivery in terms of quality and value, and using local contractors resulted in monies staying in Denbighshire. It was also noted that the framework helped ensure faster turnaround times for both remedial works and tendering of new void works. The community benefits listed in the report and Wellbeing Impact Assessment was also welcomed with opportunities for training, apprenticeships, and job creation.

Officers responded to questions from Cabinet and other members as follows –

- the council was keen to maximise community benefits wherever possible and there were plans for housing services to be more proactive in measuring community benefits and how they impacted on tenants in particular; work was also ongoing with contractors through Working Denbighshire to support them in offering apprenticeships and workstart scheme placements, etc, together with physical works to community halls/spaces with such work completed at the Phoenix Centre in Rhydwen Drive used as an illustrative example
- the Community Resilience Team also worked with community groups and third sector organisations to help them draw down funding to achieve their ambitions in areas where there was potential to access funding for community benefits
- the Wellbeing Impact Assessment (WIA) had been completed as a group involving the Lead Officer for Housing Property, Principal Investment Housing Officer and Lead Officer – Corporate Property and Housing Stock. Whilst Denbighshire Tenants Association had not been directly involved in developing the WIA, they had been involved in terms of developing the new framework
- assurances were provided that the speed of completion of void housing works was closely monitored and challenged on a regular basis; the age and condition of the property, length of previous tenancy, and the requirements of the WHQS were all factors when considering the works required and impacted turnaround times; a breakdown of the type of work carried out was provided and new WHQS relating to flooring and affordable warmth; whilst the cost averaged £13k – 15k per property, costs of £60k on one property could easily be incurred
- in terms of energy efficiency and improvements, insulated plaster board and loft insulation could be included in void housing works and consideration was given to the EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) in a property due to the target for all homes to be EPC rated C by 2030; external wall insulation would generally be carried out as part of a larger scheme across a housing estate.

Councillor Rhys Thomas thanked the officers for their work. He highlighted that the Housing Revenue Account, which funded the void housing works, had also been impacted by the current economic and financial situation facing local authorities due to UK Government's mismanagement, with increases in inflation and cost of building materials. Consequently, it would be increasing difficult to deliver all the improvements needed given the finances available to invest in housing works.

RESOLVED that Cabinet –

- (a) *confirms that it has read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment (Appendix 1 to the report) as part of its consideration, and*
- (b) *approves the re-tendering of the Council Housing Voids Refurbishment Framework.*

6 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CAPITAL SCRUTINY GROUP

Councillor Gwyneth Ellis presented the report seeking Cabinet's support of projects identified for inclusion in the 2024/25 Capital Plan, as recommended by the Capital Scrutiny Group, for submission to full Council for consideration and approval.

Cabinet was advised of the funding available for block allocations for on-going programmes of work together with the role of the Capital Scrutiny Group (CSG) and their work in reviewing bids for allocations. Details of the CSG's recommendations and reasoning for supporting specific projects had been included in the report. Given the scale of financial challenges facing the council a moratorium on any further DCC funded schemes for 2023/24 had been agreed and Cabinet and the Corporate Executive Team had developed revised principles and criteria for capital schemes in future years as set out in the report. Main points to note were the need for more reliance on grant funding, a focus on invest-to-save schemes, and a commitment to reduce annual borrowing through working towards approving block allocations that equated to the Welsh Government general capital funding available. The capital programme needed to be viewed in the context of the current financial challenges and a reduced programme had been suggested by members for consideration as part of the overall work to set balanced budgets in the future.

Councillor Gill German reported that the Modernising Education Board had acknowledged the huge amount of work carried out to draw down grant funding for school buildings which put the council in good stead. School buildings had also been impacted by the mismanagement of the UK economy with rising costs and inflation, and whilst there was a need to reduce capital expenditure given the financial situation, there had been significant spend on school buildings in recent years and coupled with the continued maximisation of grant funding allocations, there was confidence that a good standard of school buildings could be maintained.

Councillor Elen Heaton advocated the criteria/principles for capital schemes as set out in the report, which she believed helped address relatively immediate needs whilst also underscoring a commitment to long term planning resulting in a sensible and sustainable approach going forward. The Leader agreed, confirming the approach to capital schemes in response to huge financial pressures, particularly with invest-to-save schemes, tied in with both medium and long term planning.

RESOLVED that Cabinet –

- (a) *note the contents of the report;*
- (b) *approves the principles for capital schemes as set out in paragraph 4.3 of the report, and*
- (c) *supports the projects shown in Appendix 1 to the report for inclusion in the 2024/25 Capital Plan and recommends accordingly to full Council.*

7 FINANCE REPORT

Councillor Gwyneth Ellis presented the monthly report detailing the latest financial position and progress against the agreed budget strategy.

A summary of the Council's financial position was provided as follows –

- the net revenue budget for 2023/24 was £250.793m (£233.696m in 2022/23)
- an overspend of £2.840m was forecast for service and corporate budgets

- highlighted current risks and assumptions relating to corporate budgets and individual service areas
- detailed savings and efficiencies and increases in fees and charges (£8.172m)
- provided a general update on the Housing Revenue Account, Treasury Management, Capital Plan and major projects.

The Head of Finance and Audit guided members through the detail of the report. There had been a decrease in the forecasted overspend on service and corporate budgets at £2.840m compared to £3.229m the previous month with a positive movement of just under £390k. Main areas of overspend continued to be in Education and Children's Services, Highways and Environmental Services and Adults Social Care and Homelessness. This month there had been increased costs in winter maintenance and fleet which had been more than offset by further savings found by services and release of some corporate contingencies. The Housing Revenue Account had reported a slight increase in underspend at £126k from £108k due to a reduction in the revenue contribution to capital with a forecast year-end balance of just under £800k. There was no change this month in the forecasted use of reserves for schools which remained at just over £7m. The usual appendices had been included on the Capital Plan and major projects.

The Leader had been pleased to note the reduction in overspend but the council remained in a difficult financial position which had been reflected in the monthly report with obvious challenges ahead. He thanked the Lead Member, Head of Service and Finance Team for their continued hard work at this challenging time.

RESOLVED that Cabinet note the budgets set for 2023/24 and progress against the agreed strategy.

8 CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Cabinet forward work programme was presented for consideration.

RESOLVED that Cabinet's forward work programme be noted.

The meeting concluded at 10.40 am.