

MINUTE

of

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE (FIRST TIER)

Minute of Meeting held at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 15 February 2018.

Present:

Councillor Caroline Bamforth
Councillor Tony Buchanan

Councillor Stewart Miller
Councillor Paul O'Kane

Union Representatives:

Ms Sharon Kelly (EIS)
Mr Mark Kirkland (UNISON)
Mr Steven Larkin (UNISON)

Mr Gordon Lees (UNISON)
Mr Joe Lynch (UNISON)
Mr Des Morris (EIS)

Mr Morris in the Chair

Attending:

Lorraine McMillan, Chief Executive; Andy Cahill, Director of Environment; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Iain Maclean, Head of Environment; Sharon Beattie, Head of HR, Customer and Communications; Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager; Hugh Friel, Senior HR Officer; and Linda Hutchison, Senior Committee Services Officer.

Apologies:

Allison Cairns (GMB); and James O'Connell (UNITE).

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

1. The chair confirmed that Mr Martin Doran would no longer be the lead officer for the GMB in East Renfrewshire and, on behalf of the committee, wished him well for the future.

MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

2. The committee considered and approved as a correct record the Minute of the meeting held on 28 September 2017.

REVENUE BUDGET 2018/19

3. The committee considered a report by the Head of Accountancy on progress regarding the 2018/19 revenue budget. It confirmed that 2018/19 was the first year of the new three year budget period and that the Council would approve the revenue budget for that year and indicative budgets for 2019/20 and 2020/21 in March. In keeping with the longer term approach adopted by the Council to manage the financial challenges it faced, it

would also consider proposed savings measures for 2018/19 to 2020/21. Reference was made to related consultation in autumn 2017 based on grant assumptions at that time and the intention to keep forecasts and assumptions under review and present updated budgets to the Council for approval annually as figures were confirmed.

Having clarified that the Council's provisional grant figures for 2018/19 issued in December had been updated following associated checks and parliamentary debate, the report referred to a revised core grant of £177.047m. for that year which represented a cash increase of £1.259m. compared to 2017/18 and was less severe than predicted. However the Council was expected to meet new expenditure burdens, examples of which were provided. Taking account of this, the settlement was estimated to be close to a flat cash position on a like for like basis whilst the Council had to find efficiencies to compensate for other pay and price increases and service demand pressures which were not funded through the grant. It was reported that the overall grant figures for Councils remained provisional as some grant elements remained to be distributed, with confirmation of the final settlement due on 21 February.

In terms of financial impact, it was clarified that the Council was expected to address an overall budget gap of £23.8m. over the three year period 2018/19 to 2020/21. Reference was made to consultation with the Trade Unions on savings options of around £28m. for that period, and how the latest settlement position provided options to reduce or defer some of the savings required and/or increase investment in priority areas. The public budget consultation had already indicated that it was proposed to increase Council Tax by 3% in each of the next three financial years. The report explained that the Council had the option to utilise an element of its reserves to help manage the transition to the budget reduction.

Regarding the eight year Capital Plan for 2018/19 to 2025/26 for the General Fund to be considered by the Council in March, the report clarified that the final capital grant settlement would not be known by then as resources for early learning and child care expansion would not be confirmed until later in spring 2018. However, the Plan would reflect the Council's investment needs, the latest estimates of receipts from the realisation of capital assets, and utilisation of an appropriate level of the Council's Capital Reserve which could be applied over the coming years to help maintain capital investment levels. However, a significant element of increased borrowing was required to support the Plan which had been factored into future revenue budget plans. The intention to review the Plan when further financial information was available was referred to, as was the Housing Capital Plan.

It was clarified that the three year budget exercise had begun in summer 2017 and had been carried out in full consultation with Trade Unions, including at a departmental level and through other meetings. Furthermore the Council had actively engaged with its communities, employees and partners to provide details of budget savings proposals. The submission of views had been encouraged, feedback had informed the savings to be proposed to the Council, and further Trade Union consultation was planned on potential savings and efficiencies as financial plans for 2019/20 onwards were developed. Other communication issues were referred to, including plans to provide a further briefing on the full budget to the Trade Unions immediately prior to the publication of the budget papers and also to brief staff.

Whilst highlighting key aspects of the report and a related graph appended to it, the Head of Accountancy referred to the financial settlement from the Scottish Government, clarifying that following further revision the core grant for 2018/19 currently stood at £177.065m. She also referred to the overall budget gap for the three year period to 2020/21; new cost burdens; the proposed 3% increase in Council Tax in each of the next 3 financial years and related assumptions made; and how using reserves was not a permanent solution to the financial challenges the Council faced. She confirmed that a further briefing would be provided on a confidential basis to the Trade Unions at the Trade Union/management meeting on 21 February.

Regarding the Capital Grant settlement, the Head of Accountancy confirmed that the information provided on this in December had not included details of the final settlement for the early learning and childcare initiative on which clarification was expected in the spring. However assumptions had been made on what the final level of grant for that would be and the position would be reviewed in due course.

Mr Lees expressed concern regarding the funding of the early learning and child care provision expansion, and sought a commitment regarding the delivery of the related, ambitious plan for East Renfrewshire drawn up in consultation with the Trade Unions. In reply, Councillor O’Kane referred to the Council’s support for the plan, but also concerns about the initiative such as at a national level expressed in the *Early Learning and Childcare* report just published by Audit Scotland. He reported that these would be pursued through discussion with the Scottish Government, clarifying he would be happy to report back on the outcome. Having heard Mr Lees refer to the importance of the quality of such provision, Councillor Buchanan referred to the commitment that existed to the plan for East Renfrewshire which was intended to deliver quality provision at a reasonable price. He expressed hope that the final settlement would match that considered required by the authority. In reply to Mr Lees who referred to the challenges associated with securing a sufficient workforce across Scotland to support the initiative, Councillor Buchanan referred to work already being progressed to address this such as through training and work with the college sector. Councillor O’Kane also referred to ongoing discussions on this issue at a regional level.

In response to Mr Larkin, the Head of Accountancy confirmed that the part of the total funding gap attributable to 2018/19 was £6.75m., which reduced to under £5m. when the proposed Council Tax increase for that year was taken into account. In reply to Mr Kirkland, she referred to favourable interest rates the authority could secure for loans through the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB), current low rates of interest, and the wide range of interest rate levels associated with debt the Council was servicing taking account of when loans had been taken out.

It was agreed to note the position and comments made.

ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT CHANGE PROGRAMME

4. Under reference to the Minute of the meeting of 28 September 2017 (Paragraph 4 refers) when the position on the Environment Department change programme and use of consultants had been noted, Mr Lynch reported that there were ongoing concerns and difficulties still being encountered, which was why it had been requested that the issue be a standard agenda item. Having clarified that the concerns included, from a professional perspective, him not being invited to meetings, insufficient Trade Union consultation and an excessive use of consultants, he expressed the opinion that the Environment Department had adopted a particular approach on consultants regarding which concerns had been raised with the Director of Environment, Head of Environment and Procurement. He referred to difficulties and frustrations securing information sought and expressed concern regarding the level of expenditure on external consultants, querying if value for money had been achieved. Referring to a forthcoming meeting on Service Redesign 3 within the Environment Department, he added that the Trade Unions had not been involved or negotiated with properly, suggesting that decisions had been made without appropriate involvement with them on concerns.

Mr Larkin also voiced concerns regarding how some issues had been progressed, suggesting it was unacceptable to spend the level of funds it was intended to on the Spiersbridge Office which he considered to be the responsibility of the proprietor. He also queried why the number of Heads of Service in the department had been reduced to two, seeking confirmation on the consultant’s recommendation on this.

Referring to the Spiersbridge Office, Councillor Buchanan referred to concerns he held regarding the working conditions there; and the active involvement of staff in and views sought from them on the proposals and related feedback he had heard which seemed positive, adding that he considered the proposed expenditure reasonable. Regarding the use of consultants, he reported that this was anticipated to decrease as a result of which that concern was being addressed. He considered it inevitable that issues were raised during any change process, referred to the Council's desire to provide services and protect jobs, and referred to the latest initiatives being progressed under the modern ambitious programme. Councillor Buchanan also referred to comments he had received from the Director of Environment on savings proposals which protected staff and future proofed his service, arguing that benefits were already being seen and that some other authorities were in a worse financial position. He disagreed on there being a need for this item to be a standard one, clarifying that the Trade Unions had the option to raise issues in future if they considered it necessary.

The Head of Environment confirmed that no decision had been taken about the accommodation proposals, referred to the ongoing staff consultation on this feedback from which would be considered, and plans to discuss accommodation with the Trade Unions at a forthcoming second tier JCC meeting linked to which the Trade Unions could provide feedback. Regarding the consultation related concerns, he referred to guidance to departments associated with the change programme and the great extent to which it had been adhered to in relation to Service Redesign 3, including on consultation arrangements agreed between the Trade Unions and management through which it had been agreed by all to channel issues through Mr Kirkland representing UNISON. Notwithstanding this, he clarified that a request had been received about including Mr Lynch in correspondence in future which had now been agreed.

Regarding the accommodation expenditure, the Director of Environment clarified that the landlord was not responsible for the type of expenditure being considered. Regarding work undertaken by Castlerigg, he clarified that it had recommended the retention of three Heads of Service, but he had taken the decision to reduce the number to two given the budget challenges faced.

In more general terms, the Chief Executive referred to the ongoing review of accommodation across the Council, the poor state of some buildings many of which were not currently fit for purpose regarding which she cited examples, and responsibilities towards staff. She clarified that resources for addressing accommodation issues were limited, but that some work was required. Referring to the commitment that existed to work with the Trade Unions on issues, she expressed hope that a common agenda could be found and compromise reached. Mr Kirkland expressed his uneasiness about incurring expenditure on buildings in the face of job losses.

Having welcomed the forthcoming discussions to take place at the second tier JCC meeting, referring more generally to budget savings, Mr Lynch expressed the view that the Trade Unions had only received headline figures which lacked sufficient detail. He referred also to the importance of treating the Trade Unions professionally and expressed hope that the Director of Environment would adopt a change of approach, referring to concerns raised by the Trade Unions as legitimate.

It was agreed to note the position and comments made.

HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

5. The committee considered the Minutes of the meetings of the Council's Health and Safety Committee held on 6 September and 8 November 2017.

In response to Mr Kirkland and Mr Lynch who suggested it was possible, based on some statistics viewed, that procedures for reporting accidents and incidents might not have been fully adhered to in a school, the Education Senior Manager expressed surprise that this was being raised, referred to close working arrangements that existed between management and the Teaching Unions and UNISON on this issue and, supported by Mr Morris, referred to the wide circulation of guidance on this issue to head teachers, teachers and schools and related coverage at in-service events. She confirmed that the level of incidents could depend on the size of a school, confirming that all staff were encouraged to report incidents in the appropriate manner.

In response to Mr Lees, the Head of HR, Customer and Communications undertook to provide information to the Trade Unions at the forthcoming second tier JCC meeting on the interim arrangements put in place for employees who used the old guardian angel system until the new lone workers system was up and working.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

6. The committee noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 10 May 2018.

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