

MINUTE

of

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE (FIRST TIER)

Minute of Meeting held at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 30 January 2014.

Present:

Councillor Jim Fletcher
Councillor Charlie Gilbert

Councillor Ian McAlpine
Councillor Ralph Robertson

Union Representatives:

Ms Tracey Dalling (UNISON)
Mr Steven Larkin (UNISON)

Mr Gordon Lees (UNISON)
Mr Alan Munro (EIS)

Mr Munro in the Chair

Attending:

Caroline Innes, Deputy Chief Executive; Norie Williamson, Director of Finance; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy; Sharon Beattie, Human Resources Manager; Carole Donnelly, Human Resources Advisor; Steve Murray, Principal Health and Safety Advisor; and Linda Hutchison, Senior Committee Services Officer.

Apologies:

Councillor Gordon McCaskill, Mr John Guidi (SSTA), Mr Alan Scott (UNISON) and Ms Fiona Shannon (EIS).

MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

1. The committee considered and approved as a correct record the Minute of the meeting held on 12 September 2013.

REVENUE BUDGET 2014/15

2. The committee considered a report by the Director of Finance on developments regarding the 2014/15 budget, reiterating that the indicative budget for 2014/15 approved by the Council in February 2013 had been based on spending pressures and funding level forecasts which had now been firmed up. It was clarified that in keeping with the Council's longer term approach to managing the financial difficulties, in February 2013 following consultation savings had been agreed for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years. When the Council's provisional grant figures for 2014/15 had been announced in December 2013,

it had been confirmed that the core grant level was in line with that assumed previously, remaining at the same cash level as 2013/14. Consequently the Council required to self-fund pay and price increases and service demand pressures.

Having made reference to additional grant due to the Council to fund early learning and child care entitlements proposed under the Children and Young People Bill and how expenditure on related costs would be reflected in the 2014/15 budget, the report clarified that the headline grant figure announced incorporated funding to support a council tax freeze which was a condition of the grant as was maintaining teacher numbers in line with pupil numbers. The report also commented on policy, funding and timescale uncertainties linked to welfare reform and related proposals to incorporate a contingency provision within the Council's revenue budget to be drawn upon following clarification of the impact of changes.

Issues referred to on the financial outlook included the multi-year budgets set by the Council recently to help manage the extremely difficult financial circumstances and the value of continuing a longer term financial planning approach. Regarding future funding uncertainties, it was clarified that forecasts of the Council's financial position would be subject to ongoing review to reflect clarification provided on grant funding and to review assumptions on spending pressures that needed to be addressed and assumed income from Council Tax. The report commented on a forecasted local government funding reduction in cash terms in 2016/17 and 2017/18, an anticipated shortfall of £25.7 million for the Council over the 3 year period 2015/18, how this compared to 2013/14 and 2014/15 and the scale of difficulties faced which would be considered in line with the longer term financial management strategy and involve Trade Union engagement.

Whilst commenting on the Capital Plan for the General Fund which the Council would also consider in February, reference was made to the need for investment to reflect economic circumstances, a reduction in receipts from realising Capital assets and how an appropriate level of Capital Reserve had been established to apply over the coming years. Reference was also made to the Housing Capital Plan. More generally related consultation and communication, including with the Trade Unions, was commented on.

Whilst commenting in detail, Councillor Fletcher reiterated the extent to which the proposed budget was based on the indicative budget set in February 2013. He confirmed that for the 2014/15 financial year the Council would again be able to confirm its commitment to no compulsory redundancies and referred to the Council's commitment to tackling low pay by applying an increase to the living wage. He added that it had been hoped not to implement a saving arising from the review of Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs), commenting that the ability to consider this had been lost despite in-depth consideration because financial savings had to be made and because agreement had not been reached with the Trade Unions on withdrawal of the Essential Car Users allowance (ECUA) which would have been a preferable savings option. He emphasised the need for a balanced budget.

Mr Larkin welcomed the announcements on the living wage and redundancies but, supported by Mr Lees, stressed that the Trade Unions had not discussed or been asked to consider the PSA or ECUA savings as alternative savings options. Whilst commenting in similar terms in respect of the EIS, Mr Munro stated that it was unacceptable to present the above savings as alternative options, stating that other savings options could have been considered. He also commented on the extent to which the ECUA was enshrined in teacher's national and local terms and conditions and cited psychologists as an example of employees who required use of their cars to discharge their responsibilities effectively. He added that on that basis the Trade Unions had not been in a position to accept the saving. Mr Munro also suggested that excessive prudence had been demonstrated on reserves levels and that funds could have been made available to retain PSAs which was a severe cut.

Regarding the reduction in school technicians, Mr Munro requested that an impact assessment be undertaken some time after the reduced service had been operating. In relation to nursery teachers, he asked if the additional funding to be made available under the Children and Young People legislation could be used to help retain some staff. Mr Lees reiterated his disappointment about the way the PSA issue had been presented by Councillor Fletcher at the meeting and, supported by Ms Dalling, requested a review of the decision made. Ms Dalling commented that a range of potential savings could have been examined, emphasising that it had been unfair and incorrect to infer that the Trade Unions had favoured retaining the ECUA, including for higher paid employees, at the expense of protecting support for vulnerable children.

Whilst providing further clarification Councillor Fletcher, supported by Councillor McAlpine, acknowledged the Council had not been able to pursue the ECUA savings option as intended. He explained that a related consequence was that flexibility on savings had been reduced requiring other options to be examined, expressing disappointment that the PSA saving had needed to be pursued and acknowledging that the PSA and the ECUA proposals had not been presented to the Unions as either/or options. Regarding the ECUA savings option, Councillor Robertson, supported by Mr Munro, highlighted that it should have been checked earlier if any impediment existed to exploring this further. Mr Munro added that it was not the Trade Union's role to support an ECUA saving that impacted on people who required to use their car for business, including those paid more highly in accordance with their responsibilities. Ms Dalling explained that many of those receiving the ECUA were not highly paid, such as homecare workers. Making reference to all those for whom an ECUA was awarded, Councillor Fletcher clarified why the saving had not been pursued on the basis of withdrawing it from a proportion of the workforce which would have been grossly unfair, adding that the Council's scheme differed from many in place elsewhere.

Ms Dalling acknowledged the scale of the challenge facing the Council to achieve savings, emphasised the Trade Unions' willingness to engage in discussions on options and referred to a proposed buyout of the ECUA which had been rejected, stressing that ultimately decisions on savings rested with elected Members. Mr Lees highlighted that if the ECUA was ever removed, the Trade Unions' view would be that the Council should provide car transport for those for whom it was essential for their job.

Councillor Fletcher emphasised that no cuts were palatable with some less so than those actually considered. He stressed that the cooperation of Trade Unions and employees in back office services who had coped with cuts to protect front line services was highly appreciated. Having stated that public feedback on services remained favourable and referred to the financial outlook, Councillor Fletcher emphasised the scale of savings to be achieved in future and the anticipated impact on services, clarifying the extent to which reserves would support the Capital Programme.

In response to Mr Munro, Councillor Fletcher commented that it was very unlikely that the decisions made on school technicians and nursery teachers would be reviewed, but adding that the Council would comply with early learning and child care requirements approved under the Children and Young People Bill for which additional funds were to be provided. In response to general comments by Councillor Fletcher on where future savings might need to be found, Mr Munro stated the savings already made on the school technicians service, nursery teacher provision and PSAs were already cuts to front line services. Ms Dalling commented that it remained uncertain if services lost locally would ever return to local control, emphasising the significance of the current phase in the life time of authorities and reiterating that the Trade Unions wanted to engage in negotiations in future in the way that this should be done.

Councillor Fletcher quantified the level of capital investment to be taken forward during the next eight years, citing examples of projects to be pursued. The Director of Finance referred to the success of previous projects, reiterating that reserves had been increased to support the Capital Programme. Councillor Fletcher emphasised that capital investment on roads projects would be maintained following which Councillor Robertson commended action over recent years to help address roads issues. Mr Munro commended highly the services provided through Isobel Mair School and Family Centre and Eastwood High School, but emphasised the need to balance capital and revenue expenditure, citing the reduction in technician services as a diminution in service.

In response to Mr Lees who sought clarification on expenditure on external consultants including on projects that were not eventually progressed, Councillor Fletcher, supported by the Deputy Chief Executive, clarified that figures were not available but that consultants were only retained when particular skills required were unavailable in house. Councillor McAlpine stated that it could be easier to comment if the Trade Unions cited specific examples of where they felt consultants had been engaged unnecessarily.

In conclusion, Councillor Fletcher sought the support of the Trade Unions to identify future savings and move forward in partnership, emphasising that the Council shared the Trade Unions' frustrations regarding cuts. Mr Munro emphasised that the Trade Unions wished to engage in discussions in an appropriate manner, acknowledging the difficulties that lay ahead.

The committee noted the position and comments made.

COUNCIL HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

3. There was submitted and noted the Minute of the meeting of the Council's Health and Safety Committee held on 25 September 2013.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

4. The committee noted that:-

- (a) feedback from the Trade Unions was awaited on possible dates for the next meeting prior to the summer recess and that the date of the next meeting would be confirmed in due course; and
- (b) that the first meeting after the summer recess would take place on 9 October 2014.