

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 17 January 2022

Present: Councillor J Williamson (Chair)

Councillors	T Anderson	S Hayes
	H Cameron	T Jones
	P Cleary	J McManus
	W Clements	Y Nolan
	P Gilchrist	L Rennie
	JE Green	J Robinson
	EA Grey	P Stuart

109 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and those watching the webcast. She then made a statement to the Committee on the challenges the Council faced in setting a budget for 2022/23, as follows:

“The Council has a significant challenge in setting the budget for next year to fund over £27m of pressures. We do not have enough funding to provide the same services next year as we are doing this year and therefore, we have to look at what we are able to provide with the funding we have available.

We are also under external scrutiny following the publication of two government reports which expect us, in no uncertain terms, to ensure we can present a balanced budget for next year and demonstrate that we are financially sustainable for the longer term. The proposals put before the Committee this evening will be consulted upon and following the outcome of that we will recommend a budget to full Council at this Committee on 15 February.

If we fail to do this, we will receive government intervention which will result in far worse action being taken across the Borough and this Committee is not prepared for that to happen.”

110 APOLOGIES

The Chair confirmed that no apologies had been received.

111 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests and any other relevant interest and to state the nature of the interest.

No such declarations were made.

112 **MINUTES**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 30 November, and 1 December, 2021, be approved and adopted as correct records.

113 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

The Chair informed the meeting that thirteen questions had been received from members of the public, some of whom were in attendance and some who had asked that their question be read out at the meeting.

The five members of the public and two who had been unable to attend the meeting at the last minute (who had their questions read out on their behalf) put their questions to the Chair and responses were given at the meeting.

Six members of the public who had indicated they would not be attending, had their questions read out by the Director of Law and Governance and the Chair agreed that responses to these would be published on the Council website.

[Subsequent to the meeting, an agenda supplement was published with all thirteen questions and responses contained therein.]

114 **STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS**

The Chair informed the meeting that no statements or questions from Members had been received.

Councillor Jean Robinson presented a petition of some 3,100 signatories to 'Save Woodchurch Leisure Centre from closure'.

Resolved – That the petition be noted and referred to the appropriate Chief Officer in accordance with Standing Order 11.2.

115 **2022/23 BUDGET UPDATE**

The Chief Executive spoke to the Budget Update report before the Committee stressing the need for the Council to address the financial challenges it faced, as emphasised by the Leader at the start of the meeting. The two external assurance reports commissioned by the Government were both critical of the Council on its leadership and governance and financial position, stating that the Council had tried over the past years to deliver the same level of services despite not having the financial means to do so. Wirral was only one of eleven councils in England to have requested exceptional financial support from the Government for 2020/21 and 2021/22. He went on to outline the work undertaken by both officers and Members, since the publication of the reports

in November, to address the challenges faced and to establish and then maintain a sound financial footing for the Council.

The Director of Resources introduced the report, which was part of the Council's formal budget process, as set out in the constitution and in accordance with the legal requirements to set a balanced and sustainable budget for 2022/23.

The Committee on 25 October 2021 agreed to ask for the views of residents, businesses, and all those with a stake in the future of Wirral, about what council services mattered most to them to help develop the budget plan. This consultation had run from 2 to 28 November 2021 and the outcomes were provided in an appendix to the report.

At the Committee on 25 October 2021, and in line with the external assurance review recommendations to provide sensitivity analysis, three potential budget scenarios were presented as to what the budget gap could be for 2022/23. The rationale for the three scenarios was to present assumptions based on known information at the time in advance of the draft Local Government Finance Settlement being published and in advance of the compilation of proposals for pressures and growth items and savings and income for the 2022/23 budget.

The Draft Local Government Finance Settlement was published on 16 December, 2021 and budget proposals had been developed in response to the previously outlined budget gap. The report provided an updated position on the draft budget for 2022/23 and related statutory consultation with the final budget proposals to be presented to the Committee on 15 February, 2022 for recommendation to full Council. A process of review and challenge was ongoing, to ensure that the final proposals made were fully scrutinised and fit and proper in terms of readiness for decision-making.

An appendix to the report provided details of all the current proposals for consideration prior to the need to make decisions on how the budget for 2022/23 should be formulated. Setting out the potential budget proposals in the report ensured statutory consultation could be carried out in advance of setting the 2022/23 annual budget.

Information in the report also provided the opportunity for the Policy and Services Committees, at their meetings in January 2022, to provide feedback on the budget proposals for this Committee to take into consideration in recommending a legal budget to Full Council at its meeting on 28 February, 2022.

Members commented upon the report and the need to address the difficulties the Council faced, including the structural deficit which the Council had.

The Chief Executive and Director of Resources responded to a number of comments from Members

The Chair reiterated the fact that the report before the Committee contained proposals, and they were at this stage, being asked to agree the proposals going forward for consultation.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Yvonne Nolan, it was -

Resolved – That this Committee:

- (1) notes the outcome of the draft Local Government Financial Settlement for 2022/23, in advance of the final Settlement which is due later in January 2022;**
- (2) recognises the extent of the Council’s financial challenge and structural deficit, which needs to be eliminated;**
- (3) notes the savings and income proposals that could address the 2022/23 budget gap;**
- (4) notes the outcome of the November 2021 consultation;**
- (5) consults on the draft budget proposals for 2022-23, under section 65 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.**

116 **COUNCIL TAX 2022/23 - TAX BASE, DISCOUNTS AND EXEMPTIONS AND LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits introduced a report which brought together related issues regarding the proposed Council Tax Base for 2022/23 upon which the annual billing and Council Tax levels would be set; the proposed Council Tax Discounts including Local Discounts, exemptions for 2022/23 and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to be used during 2022/23.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits responded to a comment from a Member on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the effect of the reduction in the minimum amount to be paid by non-vulnerable working age claimants on collection rates. This had yet to work its way through because of the impact of the pandemic but he did state that collection rates were broadly similar.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Yvonne Nolan, it was -

A. Resolved -

(1) That the figure of 95,172.39 as the Council Tax Base for 2022/23, be approved.

B. RECOMMENDED – To Council,

(2) The level and award of each local discount for 2022/23 be as follows:

Wirral Women's & Children's Aid

To continue to award Wirral Women & Children's Aid 100% discount. This remains unchanged from 2021/22.

Care Leaver's Discount

To award Care Leavers the requisite discount to reduce their Council Tax liability to zero until they are 25. This remains unchanged from 2021/22.

Empty Property Discounts

Discount category D = 0% Full charge on properties undergoing renovations.

Discount category C = 0% Full charge on empty properties from date they become unoccupied.

Both remain unchanged from 2021/22, Except for properties requiring adaptations to meet the need of a disabled person as described in Section 3.23

Empty Property Premium =

100% (200% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty for more than two years.

200% (300% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than five years.

300% (400% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than ten years.

All remain unchanged from 2021/22, except for properties requiring adaptations to meet the need of a disabled person as described in Section 3.23

Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme

The Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme, approved by Cabinet in October 2013, continues in its current format for 2022/23. The Scheme offers help and assistance in exceptional cases of hardship.

Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS)

The current Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme remains to be the most appropriate scheme for Wirral Council and therefore will remain unchanged from 2021/22 apart from the following:

The scheme will be aligned to all the DWP's upratings and changes for Housing Benefit and Universal Credit.

117 WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Director of Law and Governance introduced a report which advised how this Committee, in co-operation with the other Policy and Service Committees, was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme.

The work programme was formed from a combination of key decisions, standing items and requested officer reports. The report provided the Committee with an opportunity to plan and regularly review its work across the municipal year and was attached as an appendix to the report. The Committee would be mindful of the decision taken at the special meeting of this Committee on 30 November, 2021, with regard to the programming of future agendas.

Resolved – That the Policy & Resources Committee work programme for the 2021/22 municipal year, be agreed.

118 REFERRAL FROM AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE: EXTERNAL AUDITOR APPOINTMENT 2023/24 TO 2027/28

The Director of Law and Governance introduced a report on the recommendations of the Audit and Risk Management Committee from its meeting on 30 November, 2021, in respect of the External Auditor Appointment 2023/24 to 2027/28.

RECOMMENDED – That Council be recommended to enter into the option to enter into the procurement exercise led by the Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) for the appointment of external auditors for a period of five financial years from 1st April 2023.

119 **MINUTES OF THE SENIOR OFFICER AND APPOINTMENTS STAFFING
SUB-COMMITTEE**

In respect of the minutes of 1 November, 2021 meeting and in response to a Member's comment, the Chief Executive agreed that he would update Members on the latest situation at a suitable time.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Yvonne Nolan, it was -

Resolved – That the minutes of the Senior Officer and Appointments Staffing Sub-Committee meetings held on 1 November and 15 December, 2021, be noted.