
WELFARE AND HEALTH SERVICES COMMITTEE

29.01.04

Present:- Councillor Michael Clishem (Vice Chairman in the chair)

Councillors William Arthur Evans, Peter Gaffey, Keith Greenly-Jones, Gwen Griffith, Linda Wyn Jones, R.L. Jones, Dafydd Owen, Ieuan Roberts, Jean Roscoe, Arthur Wyn Rowlands and R.H. Wyn Williams.

Co-opted members:- Idris Jones (Age Concern Gwynedd)

Also present:- Dafydd Lewis (Strategic Director – Care), Dilwyn Williams (Strategic Director – Resources), Gareth Jones (Senior Administrative and Legal Manager), Emyr Vaughan Evans (Assistant Director – Housing), Sheila Lloyd (Resources Manager), Glyn Tomos (Service Manager, Adult Section – Physical Disability) and Llywela Haf Owain (Committee Clerk).

Apologies:- Councillors Tony Eccles, Dylan Edwards, Seimon Glyn, Gwynfor Hughes (Chairman), P.G. Larsen, W. Roy Owen and Aled Griffiths (Disability Welfare Rights).

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

The following declared a personal interest for the reasons noted below:-

- 1) Councillor Gwen Griffith declared an interest in item 8, Housing Revenue Account Budget, as her mother lived in a council house.
- 2) Councillor Keith Greenly-Jones declared an interest in item 8, Housing Revenue Account Budget, as he was the tenant of a council house. The Senior Administrative and Public Protection Manager noted that the interest fell under paragraph 15 (a) of the code of conduct.
- 3) Councillor Jean Roscoe declared an interest in item 5 as she was one of the directors of Care and Repair.

2. URGENT MATTER

HOUSING GRANTS UNDERSPEND

The above matter, referred to this committee by the Board as an urgent matter, had not been included on the agenda, but the chairman agreed that it be discussed under Section 100(4)(b), Local Government Act 1972, as the matter required urgent attention.

The Strategic Director – Care, reported:

- i. That the matter had been discussed originally by the Board on 4 November, 2003 and that the decision had been to earmark £185,000 of the underspend within housing grants to fund the Social Services Information System (£160,000) and to safeguard Craig Fawr, Barmouth (£25,000), with the remaining £215,000 being transferred to the Renovation Areas.
- ii. As the result of a request from the Corporate Policy Committee, the matter had been reconsidered in the meeting held on 27 January. The Board resolved to confirm its previous resolution and to refer the matter to the Welfare and Health

Services Committee, and to ask them to establish a working group in order to look into the reasons why the underspend had arisen and to bring forward recommendations to avoid a similar situation arising again. It was noted that the Board had recommended that Councillor Trefor Edwards be invited to serve on the working group.

In response to questions from members he noted that whilst the lack of contractors to carry out the work was the main reason noted originally, he believed that there were a variety of reasons for the underspend and emphasised that only a very superficial inquiry had been carried out so far into the reasons for this. He referred specifically to the following reasons, namely that a Senior Officer had been absent from work for a year, that there had been delays with contracts and that tenders had been received late. He noted that this was the first year in which there had been a substantial underspend. He added that a commitment had been made to spend the money but that no expenditure had happened.

The Strategic Director – Resources, added that the decision to spend the money on other services within the Council made financial sense in order to avoid the risk of losing resources entirely. He explained that there was a danger of further slippage coming to light but that efforts would be made to ensure that this was kept within the grants field.

The portfolio leader noted that she believed underspend was an unsuitable term as the money had been committed, and that a different way of administering the grants should be sought. The Chairman of the Council added that he would like to see a timetable being drawn up for the proposed working group.

RESOLVED:

- i) **to establish a working group to look into the reasons for the underspend in the housing grants field.**
- ii) **that Councillors Gwen Griffith, Michael Clishem, William Arthur Evans, Trefor Edwards and Peredur Jenkins be elected to serve on the working group and also that the portfolio leader should act as an ex-officio member.**
- ii) **to ask the relevant officers to ensure that the working group meets within the next 3 months.**

3. MINUTES

The vice chairman signed the minutes of a meeting of this committee held on 27 November, 2003, as a true record, subject to the following sentence being amended to read as follows:-

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- “iii) it was intended to make a proposal before the next managerial meeting of the Police that all calls from *homes for the elderly or people with learning disabilities* be graded as ones requiring an ‘urgent response’. He noted that should such calls be received, his department, community safety, would report back to this committee in respect of the matter.”

4. DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS TASK GROUP

Submitted, by the Strategic Director - Care – the minutes of the above Group which met on 29 April and 31 October 2003 in order to discuss concerns that had arisen in respect of the administration of disabled facilities grants.

A report was given on the main findings and recommendations of the Task Group.

- i) concern regarding a lack of builders
- ii) the need for operational arrangements to be aware of the special needs of complex and severe cases.
- iii) the need for discussion to take place between the Council and the Health Service regarding the salaries of Occupational Therapists.
- iv) that it would be useful for the Task Group to meet annually to review the situation.

A member noted that it would be better to set a fee for carrying out adaptations rather than asking companies to submit a tender every time, as this would be a means of reducing paperwork.

In response to a question, the Adults Section Service Manager – Physical Disability reported that a huge gap existed between the salary the Council paid Occupational Therapists and the salary paid by the Health Service. He went on to say that it was difficult to see how it would be possible to compete with the salary offered by the Health Service, unless help was provided by the Assembly. He noted that the service was maintaining the situation well at the moment and that disability consultants had been employed to deal with simple adaptations.

The Strategic Director – Care added that discussions had been held with the Personnel Department regarding the salaries of Occupational Therapists and that the recommendation at present was to do nothing until the salary scales of social workers had been reviewed as this would affect the salaries of Occupational Therapists.

RESOLVED to accept the report and also the above findings and recommendations.

5. GWYNEDD COUNCIL RENT EQUALISATION PROJECT

Submitted – a report on Gwynedd Council house rents, by the Assistant Director – Housing.

Reported by the Assistant Director – Housing:

- i. that there were inconsistencies in the rent levels of Council housing across the county, and that raising rents by a percentage in accordance with Assembly guidance made the situation worse. It was noted that the Assembly had commissioned a report to carry out nationwide research into the situation, and it was hoped it would be completed by Spring 2004.
- ii. that Beha Williams Norman Ltd had been commissioned to undertake an assessment of the current position in relation to rent levels across the Council's area, to ensure that the rent paid reflected the benefit for the tenant as regards factors such as size, type, facilities, location etc, as well as complying with the regulations of the Assembly and working within the financial constraints of the housing revenue account.
- iii. It was hoped that a methodology for adapting the rents could be submitted to the Board by March 2004, but it was not foreseen that the scheme could be implemented until January 2005. Members were warned that the process of equalising rents was likely to take years to complete.

RESOLVED to note and accept the report.

6. MANAGEMENT REVIEW – JOINT STORE SERVICE

Submitted – the report of the Head of Social Services on a Management Review of the Joint Store Service, by the Adults Section Service Manager – Physical Disabilities.

The Service Manager, Adults Section – Physical Disabilities reported:

- i. that the review had been carried out as a result of the Health Authority's request for an annual contribution of 36k towards funding the cost of maintaining equipment and apparatus provided and transported on behalf of the Social Services Department. It was noted that it was a statutory responsibility for the Council to provide this kind of service.
- ii. that the review had shown that the present partnership was operating effectively, and that the service offered was favourable as regards cost, performance and quality. It was added that should the service choose to levy a charge on users, this would increase the administrative work.

In response to a question from a member, he noted that specific distribution days had been fixed for various areas within Gwynedd.

RESOLVED to approve the current model of providing the service and to recommend to the Board that an annual grant of £20k be given from April 2004 onwards.

7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGET

Submitted by the Strategic Director – Resources – a report on the Housing Revenue Account Budget which recommended the establishment of a budget for the housing revenue account for 2004/05 and also to set grant levels and payments for services for the year.

The Strategic Director – Resources, reported:

- i. that final figures had not been received from the Assembly regarding rent guidelines grant and as a result, there was a possibility that some of the figures would have to be adjusted in due course.
- ii. that it had been resolved last year that the additional budget of £533,800 received as a result of implementing the supporting people system would be used to keep the Council's options open as regards trying to ensure that the council's housing stock reached the housing quality standard by 2012. However, it had been resolved to use the money to meet a deficit of £131,730 in the Housing Revenue Account for 2003/04.
- iii. it was noted that should the 2004/5 budget remain at standstill, the surplus of £533,800 would be reduced to £257,860. In order to retain the surplus for the original purpose, namely to keep the Council's options open as regards ensuring that the council's housing stock reaches the housing quality standard by 2012, further savings of £275,940 would be required over and above the £131,730 noted for 2003/04, a total of £407,670.
- iv. that the sale of council houses meant less income for the council and in the long run created more of a deficit. It was noted also that in 2004/5 the housing revenue benefits for tenants would be taken from the housing revenue account and as a result there would be a corresponding reduction in the subsidy received.
- v. that a rent increase of 3.56% was being recommended, which was lower than the Assembly guideline, as using any figure above that guidelines would incur a grant penalty. It was explained that using a lower figure would mean less money would be available to spend on improving the quality of housing.

In response to a question from a member, he noted that ¼ of the money received on the sale of houses was spent on improving the quality of houses, whilst the remainder was used to re-pay debt. He noted also that consideration was currently being given to how the Council could encourage people not currently claiming housing benefit, to do so. The Assistant Director – Housing added that assistance was at present only given with housing benefits

and that there was no increase in the rent of shops as it was necessary for the district valuer to review the rent in accordance with the Council's regulations.

In response to questions from members, the Strategic Director – Care, noted that there would be a need to look at the sale of houses in the future and to compare the Council's situation with that of other councils. He noted that the most important thing at present was to be aware that the council's housing stock was dwindling in numbers as a result of the right to buy scheme. He added that tenants were informed of rent increases by letter a month beforehand.

Members expressed their wish to have a report on the activities of the Welfare Rights Unit to see what they were doing to encourage persons who were entitled to benefits, to claim them.

RESOLVED:

- i) **To recommend to the Board that rents be increased as follows for 2004/5**
 - **Houses – rent increase of 3.56%**
 - **Garages – to add 50c to the present average rent of £5**
 - **Charges for services – increase of 2.5%**
 - **Shops – no provision for a review during 2004/5.**
- (ii) **That the Policy Unit within the Care Directorate (in consultation with the Head of Policy and Performance and the Head of Housing) should bring forward plans to realise savings of £407,670 in the budget for 2005/6.**
- (iii) **That the deficit of £407,670 in 2004/5 be met by using the money released from the supporting people system and that the remaining surplus be spent on one-off items.**

Councillor Keith Greenly-Jones requested it be minuted that he had voted against the above resolution.

8. NORTH WALES FIRE AUTHORITY INTEGRATED RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN

Submitted, for observations, a report by the Strategic Director – Resources, on the North Wales Fire Authority Integrated Risk Management Plan.

It was reported that the scheme detailed their strategic proposals regarding the future of the Fire Service and also concentrated on eight specific risks and the steps that should be taken to deal with them. It was explained that the document placed more emphasis on preventative work rather than responsive work as well as the importance of co-operation in order to manage risk.

Members expressed concern that the Fire Service would not respond to calls which in their opinion were hoax calls, as they believed that pressure should be brought to bear on the government to allow the Fire Authority to levy a charge on those persons making hoax calls. It was also noted that they were concerned that the proposed working hours referred to in the report were likely to lead to loss of staff, especially part-time staff.

In response to a question from a member, the Strategic Director – Resources, noted that he understood that the fire authority had no right to charge for hoax calls.

RESOLVED:

- i) to note and accept the information**
- ii) to submit a response based on the above points noted in the report, as well as the above observations from the councillors.**

The meeting began at 2:00 pm and ended at 4:15pm.