

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

At a Hybrid Meeting of West Dunbartonshire Council held in the Civic Space, 16 Church Street, Dumbarton on Wednesday, 1 March 2023 at 4.00 p.m.

Present: Provost Douglas McAllister and Councillors Jim Bollan, Karen Conaghan, Ian Dickson, Diane Docherty, Craig Edward, Gurpreet Singh Johal, Daniel Lennie, David McBride, Jonathan McColl, James McElhill, Michelle McGinty, June McKay, John Millar, Lawrence O'Neill, Lauren Oxley, Chris Pollock, Martin Rooney, Gordon Scanlan, Hazel Sorrell, Clare Steel and Sophie Traynor.

Attending: Peter Hessett, Chief Executive; Alan Douglas, Chief Officer – Regulatory and Regeneration (Legal Officer); Laurence Slavin, Chief Officer – Resources and Section 95 Officer; Peter Barry, Chief Officer – Housing and Employability; Beth Culshaw, Chief Officer – West Dunbartonshire Health and Social Care Partnership, Amanda Graham, Chief Officer – Citizen, Culture and Facilities; Gail Macfarlane, Chief Officer – Roads and Neighbourhood; Laura Mason, Chief Education Officer; Victoria Rogers, Chief Officer – People and Technology; Angela Wilson, Chief Officer – Supply, Distribution and Property; Michelle Lynn, Assets Co-ordinator; George Hawthorn, Manager – Democratic and Registration Services, Carol-Ann Burns, Senior Democratic Services Officer; and Scott Kelly, Committee Officer.

Also Attending: Tom Reid, Audit Director, Mazars.

Provost Douglas McAllister in the Chair

STATEMENT BY CHAIR

Provost McAllister advised that the meeting was being audio streamed and broadcast live to the internet and would be available for playback.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was noted that there were no declarations of interest in any of the items of business on the agenda.

RECORDING OF VOTES

The Council agreed that all votes taken during the meeting would be done by roll call vote to ensure an accurate record.

REQUEST FOR DEPUTATION – JOINT TRADES UNION

The Provost advised that a late request had been received to hear a deputation from GMB, Unite and Unison in relation to the item General Services Budget Setting 2023/24 and 2024/25 - 2027/28 Budget Estimates and Council Tax Setting.

Having heard the Provost, the Council agreed to suspend Standing Orders 18 (b) and (e) in order to allow the deputation of Trades Union Representative, three may address Council for a total together of not more than ten minutes, and to allow the deputation to remain for the duration of the meeting.

The Provost invited the delegation, namely David Scott, Margaret Wood, David Smith and Margo Davenport forward to join the meeting, and Mr Smith, Mr Scott and Ms Wood were heard in relation to their concerns regarding potential budget cuts.

The Provost thanked the Representatives for their contributions.

GENERAL SERVICES BUDGET SETTING 2023/24 AND 2024/25 – 2027/28 BUDGET ESTIMATES AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING

A report was submitted by the Chief Officer – Resources:-

- (a) summarising the key issues relating to the revenue budget estimates of council tax for 2023/24 and providing the budget estimates for 2024/25 to 2027/28;
- (b) providing an update in relation to the capital budget; and
- (c) seeking approval to set the General Services revenue and capital budgets for 2023/24 through approval of options to close the 2023/24 budget gap.

After discussion and having heard from the Chief Officer – Resources and relevant Officers in further explanation and in answer to Members' questions, Councillor Rooney, seconded by Councillor McGinty, moved:-

Council thanks the Chief Executive and the Chief Officer of Resources for the detailed report at item 5 comprising a covering report and appendices with a total of 353 pages. Council also thanks the Chief officer Resources for his verbal update regarding Scottish Government announcements about funding and on changes to cost pressures and saving options. This report shows the level of work that has gone into the budget setting process this year.

This is without doubt the greatest financial challenge in the history of West Dunbartonshire Council. We have increasing cost pressures, limited funding support from government and we were left with the additional financial burden as a result of the previous administrations failure to tackle the financial risks.

Council notes the hugely challenging financial position facing the council as a result of sustained cuts to its revenue funding since 2007. In the context of West Dunbartonshire this has cumulatively amounted to over £20 million of recurring savings having to be made over the period and the exhaustion of the Council's reserves.

The Scottish Government's claim that the local government funding increase for 2023/24 was £570 million is misleading. COSLA subsequently demonstrated that the actual cash increase to core council funding was in fact a much smaller £71 million equivalent to a significant real terms reduction in funding.

Given the current extreme financial landscape, the ever increasing lack of flexibility for councils due to Scottish Government interference, most notably in respect of the recent announcements regarding teacher numbers, pupil support staff and learning hours, is resulting in very limited choices in how councils deliver services. This will inevitably impact on the provision of vital community services.

Council agrees that the Scottish Government in power since 2007 has regrettably demonstrated disdain and contempt for local government in Scotland and seems to have entirely given up on any pretence of partnership working or recognition of councils' legitimate authority to make decisions on services they deliver on behalf of valued local communities.

Council agrees that quite apart from this disdain and contempt for local government that the Scottish Government has specifically acted against the interests of West Dunbartonshire by amending the law in respect of the application of the Scottish Landfill Tax, effectively reversing a decision of the Upper Tier Tribunal without any proper consideration of the impact on Councils. As a result an extra £1.4M of savings has been necessitated by the Scottish Government's actions.

This continued ill-considered approach by the Scottish Government to centralising decision making and imposition of restrictions poses a very concerning threat to the continued ability of the council to maintain a range of high-quality services to the public in West Dunbartonshire. Despite the political and financial context, the Council is still legally required to set a balanced budget.

Given the above the Council agrees the following:-

- (1) to note the updated position regarding projections for the revenue budget in 2022/23 as identified at paragraph 4.1.1;

- (2) to note the projected reserves position of the Council as at 31/03/2023 as identified at paragraph 4.1.5;
- (3) the revision to the use of the Service Concessionary One-Off Benefit as identified at paragraph 4.1.6;
- (4) to note the projected outturn position for capital for 2022/23 as detailed in Appendix 5 to the report including information in relation to the re-profiling of a number of projects and resources into future years;
- (5) to approve the savings options in Appendix 2 to the report (Summarised Saving Options and Management Adjustments), to be used to set the General Services revenue budget for 2023/24 and assist with future projected budget gaps and use of reserves, all subject to the amendments appended in Appendix 1 to this motion (shown as Appendix 1 to these Minutes);
- (6) to note the management adjustments to be used to set the General Services revenue budget for 2023/24 and assist with future projected budget gaps including the additional £120k detailed by the Chief Officer Resources;
- (7) a 5% increase to the Council Tax rate which will result in a 2023/24 Band D Charge of £1,398.98;
- (8) to approve the proposed updated capital plan from 2023/24 as detailed in Appendix 6 to the report;
- (9) that a report will be brought to a future meeting of the Corporate Services Committee to agree the 2023/24 West Dunbartonshire Leisure Trust management fee; and
- (10) the details of consultation is at Appendix 2 (shown as Appendix 2 to the Minutes) and the Administration's, savings, growth items and other measures to close the budget gap as appended at Appendix 3 to this motion (shown as Appendix 3 to these Minutes).

SUMMARY OF BUDGET	2023/24 (£,000)
Budget Gap Before Any Measures to Balance Budget	21,799
Measures Agreed December 2022	-7,065
Updated Gap	14,734
Labour Administration Measures to Balance Budget	
Saving Options (See Appendix 1 to this Motion)	-6,288
Management Adjustments	-1,352
5% Council Tax Increase	-1,915
Use of Smoothing Fund (See Appendix 2 to this Motion)	-3,000
Use of VERS Reserve (See Appendix 2 to this Motion)	-2,249
Labour Growth Items (See Appendix 2 to this Motion)	320
Increase in Turnover Savings (See Appendix 2 to this Motion)	-250
Surplus	0

At this point in the meeting Councillor Dickson requested an adjournment of the meeting to allow consideration of the motion. The Provost declined the request.

As an amendment, Councillor Dickson, seconded by Councillor Conaghan, moved:-

Council agrees to a Council Tax rise of 5%; this would mean a Band D property would pay an extra £1.28 per week. This will result in a 2023/24 Band D charge of £1398.98.

Council agrees the management adjustments at the revised figures of £1,352,000.

Council notes that there has been no public consultation on either local priorities nor on the specific savings options presented here today.

This would be unacceptable at any time, but more so now when we face having to make serious decisions on drastic cuts to public services, and greatly reduced investment across West Dunbartonshire.

Therefore, Council agrees that officers will immediately carry out a public consultation to allow members to make informed decisions on the budget at a future meeting, to be called by the Provost at a time and date that allows for feedback from that consultation to be presented to members as part of the published meeting papers. This will allow members to make informed decisions fully understanding the views of our local communities.

There being a remaining gap of £11,467,000, to allow a balanced budget to be fixed today Council agrees to draw this sum from the Service Concessionary One off Benefit. At that further meeting having taken full cognisance of feedback from our communities, any additional savings agreed will be redirected to Council reserves to assist with future year spending challenges.

On a roll call vote being taken 9 Members voted for the amendment, namely Councillors Conaghan, Dickson, Docherty, McColl, McElhill, Oxley, Pollock, Scanlan and Traynor, and 11 Members voted for the motion, namely Provost McAllister and Councillors Johal, Lennie, McBride, McGinty, McKay, Millar, O'Neill, Rooney, Sorrell and Steel. Two Members abstained from voting the motion, namely Councillors Bollan and Edward. The motion was accordingly declared carried.

DUMBARTON COMMON GOOD BUDGET UPDATE 2023/24

A report was submitted by the Chief Officer – Resources providing an update on the 2022/23 Dumbarton Common Good budget and seeking approval for a revised 2023/24 budget and indicative budgets for 2024/25 and 2025/26.

The Council agreed:-

- (1) to note the probable 2022/23 outturn as set out in Appendix 1 to the report;
- (2) to approve the revised 2023/24 budget as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, including the approval of additional budgets for the Pipe Band Championship of £50,000, £10,000 for resources for Dumbarton Library and an increase in grant of £13,706 for Alcoholics Anonymous;
- (3) to note the indicative budgets to 2025/26 as set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- (4) to note the projected balances available for carry forward of £615,424 at 31 March 2023 and £584,446 at 31 March 2024 (based upon the revised draft 2023/24 budget).

CAPITAL STRATEGY 2023/24 TO 2031/32

A report was submitted by the Chief Officer – Resources providing the updated capital strategy for the period 2023/24 to 2031/32.

After discussion and having heard the Chief Officer – Resources in further explanation and in answer to Members' questions, the Council agreed to approve West Dunbartonshire Council's updated capital strategy for the period 2023/24 to 2031/32.

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) ESTIMATES AND RENT SETTING 2023/2024

A report was submitted by the Chief Officer – Housing and Employability:-

- (a) seeking approval of the updated HRA capital programme;
- (b) seeking approval of the HRA revenue budget for 2023/24; and

- (c) seeking agreement of the level of weekly rent increase for 2023/24 which is sufficient to fund the revenue budget for 2023/24 and the associated capital investment programme.

Councillor Johal, seconded by Councillor McGinty moved:-

Council thanks the Chief Officer and all of his staff for their work in preparing the report for consideration by elected members.

Council also records its thanks to the Tenants Representatives and the individuals who have taken part in the tenant consultation which informs the decision today.

The consultation included two options with 52.9% supporting a 4% increase in rents; while 47.1% supported a 5% increase.

The difference in the average weekly rent between the two options was £0.84 pence.

However, the increase by 5% provided an additional £50m of capital investment over the next five years in housing to address a number of priorities (shown in Appendix 4 to these Minutes).

Given the above, the Council agrees the recommendations in the report but with an important difference and after consultation with the WDTRO to increase weekly rent, pitch rent at the Gypsy Travellers site, and lock-up rents by 5%, as detailed below:-

This means a weekly average rent increase of £4.22 for tenants, of whom 72% are in receipt of Housing Benefit/Universal Credit.

We are aware any increase can be hard on our tenants especially through the current cost of living crisis, and to support our most disadvantaged tenants we have set aside £565k of direct financial assistance to support them over the course of the next financial year.

The Administration has ambitions to develop our Housing Service to become sector leading, meeting and exceeding the needs and expectations of our tenants, now and into the future. This requires greater investment in tenants' priorities such as:

- More new sustainable housing that is attractive, built to the highest standards and net zero carbon
- More homes to suit the needs of larger families
- More homes to address identified medical needs
- Better homes where we respond proactively to damp and mould issues
- Better homes that are energy efficient
- More homes to increase choice and opportunities for families

In order to increase the housing supply and the quality of existing properties, the Council agrees the following:

- Use £10m to increase the Council's buy back programme over the next five years to purchase additional housing on the local housing market to address identified need
- Use £40m to accelerate the following renewal and replacement programmes over the next five years that our tenants have told us are most important to them:-
 - Energy efficiency measures including new heating systems
 - Kitchen and Bathroom Renewals
 - Window/Door Renewal Programmes
 - Accelerate a programme to eliminate damp and mould problems from our tenants homes

The Chief Officer and his management team is asked to develop the programme of additional £50m of capital investment in full consultation and involvement of the WDTR0 and report back on progress at future Housing and Communities Committees. This programme will set out in detail the scale of additional development and improvements across our housing stock.

As an amendment, Councillor Conaghan, seconded by Councillor Traynor, moved:-

That the Council agrees the recommendations stated in the report, namely:-

- (1) to note the outcome of the tenant consultation process detailed in Appendix 1 to the report;
- (2) to note the projected break even revenue position for 2022/23;
- (3) to note the progress made, per Appendix 2 to the report, in the HRA capital programme for 2022/23;
- (4) the updated five year capital programme of work set out in Appendix 3 to this report inclusive of the Council's new house building programme and the overall resources to fund the programme
- (5) the revenue budget for 2023/24 as detailed in Appendix 4 to the report;
- (6) the 4% weekly rent increase for 2023/24 at an average £3.38 on a 52 week basis (£3.73 on a 47 week basis), equating to 4% to meet the planned revenue HRA budget as detailed in Appendix 4 to the report;
- (7) to increase rents at the Gypsy Travellers site by the 4%; increasing pitch rent by £3.08 to £80.09 on a 52 week basis (£3.41 to £88.61 per week on a 47 week basis);

- (8) to increase the lock-up rents by 4%, increasing rent by £0.22 to £5.66 per week on a 52 week basis (£0.24 on a 47 week basis to £6.26);
- (9) to note the increase in the prudential reserve target for 2023/24 (from £0.940m to £0.984m); and
- (10) the recommended use of the projected reserves as at 31 March 2023 for the purposes identified at 4.3.4 of the report.

On a roll call vote being taken 9 Members voted for the amendment, namely Councillors Conaghan, Dickson, Docherty, McColl, McElhill, Oxley, Pollock, Scanlan and Traynor, and 13 Members voted for the motion, namely Provost McAllister and Councillors Bolland, Edward, Johal, Lennie, McBride, McGinty, McKay, Millar, O'Neill, Rooney, Sorrell and Steel. The motion was accordingly declared carried.

The meeting closed at 8.15 p.m.