

## **WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**

At a Hybrid Meeting of West Dunbartonshire Council held in the Civic Space, 16 Church Street, Dumbarton on Wednesday, 6 March 2024 at 4.06 p.m.

**Present:** Provost Douglas McAllister and Councillors Jim Bollan, Ian Dickson, Diane Docherty, Gurpreet Singh Johal, Daniel Lennie, David McBride, Jonathan McColl, Michelle McGinty, June McKay, John Millar, Karen Murray Conaghan, 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; Amanda Graham, Chief Officer – Citizen, Culture and Facilities; Gail Macfarlane, Chief Officer – Roads and Neighbourhood; Laura Mason, Chief Officer – Education; Beth Culshaw, Chief Officer – Health & Social Care Partnership; Victoria Rogers – Chief Officer, People and Technology; Michelle Lynn, Assets Co-ordinator; Alan Young, Housing Asset and Investment Manager; John Kerr, Housing Development and Homeless Manager; Carol Alderson, Finance Manager; Michael McDougall, Manager of Legal Services; George Hawthorn, Manager of Democratic and Registration Services; and Carol-Ann Burns, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

**Apologies:** Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Councillors Craig Edward and James McEhill.

**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.

### **REQUEST FOR DEPUTATION – JOINT TRADES UNION**

The Provost advised that a late request had been received to hear a deputation from GMB, Unite, Unison and EiS in relation to the item 'General Services Budget Setting 2025/26 and 2028/29 - 2027/28 Budget Estimates'.

Having heard the Provost, the Council agreed to suspend Standing Orders 18 (b) and (e) in order to allow the deputation which, the Provost advised, would be taken immediately prior to the aforementioned item of business.

### **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.

### **OPEN FORUM**

The Provost advised that an Open Forum question had been received from Ms Amy Unitt. It was noted that Ms. Unitt was not in attendance to address Council. Having heard the Legal Officer Council agreed that a written response would be provided to Ms. Unitt.

### **DEPUTATION – JOINT TRADES UNION**

The Provost invited the delegation, namely Mr Mick Dolan (EiS), Mr Norman King (Unite the Union), Mr David Scott (GMB), and David Smith (UNISON) forward to join the meeting, and each was heard in relation to their concerns regarding potential budget cuts.

The Provost thanked the Representatives for their contributions and invited them to remain in the meeting for its duration.

### **GENERAL SERVICES BUDGET SETTING 2024/25 AND 2025/26 TO 2028/29 BUDGET ESTIMATES**

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

- (a) summarising the key issues relating to the revenue budget estimates and setting of Council Tax for 2024/25 and providing budget estimates for 2025/26 to 2028/29;
- (b) advising of the mid-range estimates, with the best case and worst case estimates summarised in paragraph 4.14.1 of the report; and

- (c) seeking approval to set the General Services Revenue and Capital Budgets for 2024/25 through approval of options to close the 2024/25 revenue budget gap.

It was noted that a revised version of Reducing the Occupational Health Budget - saving option PT10, page 67 of the papers had been circulated to Members immediately prior to the meeting.

After discussion and having heard the Chief Officer – Resources, in further explanation and in answer to Members' questions.

Councillor Rooney moved:-

Council thanks the Chief Executive and the Chief Officer of Resources for the detailed report at item 6 comprising a comprehensive covering report and appendices. Council also thanks the Chief Officer of Resources for the verbal update following any changes to the budget gap and the report. This report shows the level of work that has gone into the budget setting process this year.

This is the most challenging financial period in the Council's history and with the cost of living crisis impacting on ever increasing numbers of our residents, we are acutely aware of the need to protect services and jobs for local people. The funding gap may be lower than this time last year but rapidly reducing budgets every year mean the options available to us to continue to provide services in the same way are becoming more and more limited.

The pressures this Council is facing are a direct result of sustained cuts to its revenue funding since 2007. This has cumulatively amounted to over £30million of recurring savings having to be made in our area over the period, as well as the near exhaustion of the Council's reserves.

The Scottish Government's claim that a Council Tax freeze helps the least well off is simply not credible. In addition, its claim that the Council Tax freeze is fully funded is false.

This extreme financial landscape, coupled with the ever increasing lack of flexibility for councils due to Scottish Government interference in democratic decision making, results in very limited choices in how councils deliver services. This will inevitably impact on the provision of vital community services.

Council regrettably agrees that the Scottish Government in power since 2007 has demonstrated contempt for local government in Scotland. It 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. Their stated commitment to the Verity House Agreement has no credibility and emphasises their disdain for local democracy and the communities that councillors are elected to represent.

Council agrees that the Scottish Government has specifically acted against the interests of West Dunbartonshire by amending the floor mechanism in the distribution which results in a less well-off Council like West Dunbartonshire losing out. As a result of the actions of the Scottish Government, West Dunbartonshire Council has required to identify an extra £1.7m of savings.

This continued ill-considered approach by the Scottish Government to centralise decision making and impose spending restrictions poses a very real threat to the continued ability of the Council to maintain the range of high-quality services our communities need. Despite this unhelpful political and financial context, the Council is still legally required to set a balanced budget.

Given the above the Council agrees:

- (1) to retain the full amount of Scottish Government funding for pay to help protect local services. As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the HSCP will have £2.454m of un-earmarked reserves; and £15.451m of earmarked reserves. In addition, it will benefit over the next three years from a reduction in employers contribution to SPF and can use these to support their budget.
- (2) to note the management adjustments set out in Appendix 3 to the report will be used to set the General Services revenue budget for 2024/25 and assist with future projected budget gaps.
- (3) that the Council Tax will be frozen for financial year 2024/25. This means that the Band D Council Tax rate will remain at £1,398.98.
- (4) the proposed updated capital plan as set out in Appendix 5 to the report from 2024/25.
- (5) to approve the 2024/25 West Dunbartonshire Leisure Trust management Fee of £3,658,373.
- (6) to note the Council had already committed £5.332m of reserves at the December Council.
- (7) the additional use of reserves to help balance the 2024/25 budget as follows:
  - a. Permanent use of reserves of £934,000.
  - b. Temporary use of reserves £3.077 million.
- (8) a report will be brought to Council in June to provide an update on the £62.7m of additional funding to be distributed to local government and for options to replenish the Council's reserves.

- (9) the Administration's savings, growth items and other measures to close the budget gap as appended to this motion (shown as Appendix 1 to these Minutes).
- (10) to note that option RN06 relating to Bowling Club savings will not be taken for 2024/25, but agree Council Officers will work with the bowling clubs to assess how best to support their long term future as some clubs have very few members and significant running costs.
- (11) EDU05: The introduction of the Early Start Clubs, costs will be reduced from those proposed to a charge of £2 per session for pupils not entitled to free school meals and to abolish the charge for those pupils who are entitled to free school meals. The Education Service will consult with service users on fee rates including any possible variation for siblings.
- (12) EDU09: The proposal was to close St Eunan's and Linnvale Out of School Care services due to low usage. However, feedback suggests that parents really value the service and would be willing to pay more to retain it. Therefore, the fees will increase by £3 per session from April 2024. Thereafter for 2025/26 the fees will increase to cover the cost of the service.
- (13) the underfunding of Local Government is unlikely to change over the next three years and all community organisations, whether impacted by savings or not, should be aware of the Council's expected financial challenges. It would be prudent for them to proactively explore alternative funding sources to help ensure their future sustainability.
- (14) to note the Council has established four new funds designed to support communities and help those community organisations affected by changes to their funding. These include:
- a. A £250,000 Community Success Revenue Fund;
  - b. A £100,000 Youth Success Revenue Fund;
  - c. A £150,000 Community Success Capital Fund; and
  - d. A £250,000 Community Sports Success Capital Fund
- (15) in terms of the additional increase to sales, fees and charges, this will apply to all services with the exception of School Meals which will have the 4% applied that was agreed at Council in December.

At this point in the meeting Councillors Dickson, McColl, Scanlan and Docherty each requests<sup>1</sup> an adjournment of the meeting to allow consideration of the motion. The Provost declined the requests.

As an amendment, Councillor Dickson moved:-

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<sup>1</sup> As corrected by West Dunbartonshire Council at its meeting on 28 March 2024

Council agrees the recommendations at 2.1 of the report, subject to the following provisions.

Council agrees to freeze Council Tax and accept the Scottish Government's £2.219m of funding to do so. This funding, which has been baselined for future years and is recurring in terms of our budget gap projections, offsets a potential Council Tax rise of more than 5%; this Council Tax freeze is fully funded this year and going forward into future years.

Council notes the £8.366m budget gap and agrees the £1.719m growth items alongside political decisions to balance the budget appended to this motion (shown as Appendix 2 to these Minutes).

Westminster policies designed to benefit London and the Southeast of England continue to damage the wider economy, and it is our citizens who are suffering.

As a Council we have a moral obligation to do everything we can to protect public services and make things easier for people in the face of the cost of living, or more accurately the cost of the union crisis.

To that end, this SNP budget includes no cuts to services and no redundancies.

The SNP budget also provides £403k for an in-year community investment fund. The purpose of this fund is twofold.

Firstly, it provides free reserves for the Council to spend on activities that will benefit our communities. Councillors and Officers bring proposals to Council and Committee through motions or reports throughout the year, and this funding will be available to assist in delivering these policy proposals.

Secondly, it will allow the Council to slow down the current rush to transfer or lease community facilities and enable a more open and transparent process to be developed.

To this end, Council asks that a report be brought to a future Council or IRED Committee for the purpose of:

- Outlining the current process being followed for leasing/community asset transfer.
- Proposing changes to the process to facilitate proper discussions with current users of facilities prior to bringing reports to committee for agreement.
- Proposing any further changes that can make the process more transparent and provide Councillors with the information we require to make informed decisions.

In agreeing this 2024/25 budget, Council notes that we are reducing the projected 2025/26 budget gap by £3.961m and the 2026/27 budget gap by £4.011m.

At this point in the meeting, Councillor Rooney's motion was seconded by Councillor McGinty and Councillor Dickson's amendment was seconded by Councillor Scanlan.

On a roll call vote being taken 8 Members voted for the amendment, namely Councillors Dickson, Docherty, McColl, Murray Conaghan, 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. The motion was accordingly declared carried. One Member abstained from voting, namely Councillor Bollan. The motion was declared carried.

Councillor Bollan, having failed to find a seconder for a proposed second amendment asked for his dissent to be recorded in respect of this item.

### **CAPITAL STRATEGY 2024/25 TO 2032/33**

A report was submitted by the Chief Officer – Resources providing an updated Capital Strategy for the period 2024/25 to 2032/33 and seeking its approval.

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 2024/25 to 2032/33.

Note: Councillor McKay left the meeting at this point.

### **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME, REVENUE BUDGET, AND RENT LEVELS FOR 2024/25**

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

- (a) seeking approval of the proposed HRA Capital Investment Programme and the HRA Revenue Budget for 2024/25; and
- (b) seeking agreement of the level of weekly rent increase for 2024/25.

After discussion and having heard the Chief Officer – Housing and Employability in further explanation and in answer to Members' questions, Council agreed.

- (1) to note the progress made in the HRA capital programme for 2023/24 as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report;
- (2) to approve the HRA Capital Investment Plan 2024/25 – 2028/29 as detailed in Appendix 2 to the report;

- (3) to approve the HRA revenue budget for 2024/25 as detailed in Appendices 3 and 4 to the report;
- (4) to approve a 6.7% weekly house rent increase for 2024/25 at an average £5.94 on a 52-week basis (£6.58 on a 47-week basis) inclusive of homes used as emergency homeless temporary accommodation;
- (5) to approve a 6.7% weekly Gypsy Travellers site rent increase, increasing pitch rent by £5.37 to £85.46 on a 52-week basis (£5.94 to £94.55 per week on a 47-week basis);
- (6) to approve a 6.7% lock up rent increase, increasing rent by £0.38 to £6.04 per week on a 52-week basis (£0.42 on a 47-week basis to £6.68);
- (7) to note the outcome of the tenant consultation process as detailed in Appendix 5 to the report ;
- (8) to note the increase in the prudential reserve target for 2024/25 (from £0.984m to £1.064m);
- (9) to note that the HRA continues to face considerable cost pressures and that the latest forecast is for HRA to draw reserves of £2.140m to balance the 2023/24 revenue budget with closing reserves forecast at circa £0.500m; and
- (10) to note that work will continue in 2023/24 and 2024/25 to identify and deliver further general efficiencies across all areas of the housing budget that will allow reserves to be replenished and maintained in line with the prudential target (as detailed in Appendix 3 to these Minutes).

### **DUMBARTON COMMON GOOD BUDGET UPDATE 2024/25**

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

- (a) providing an update on the 2023/24 Dumbarton Common Good budget; and
- (b) seeking approval for a revised 2024/25 budget and indicative budgets for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

After discussion and having heard the Chief Officer – Resources in further explanation and in answer to Members' questions, the Council agreed:-

- (1) to note the Dumbarton Common Good 2023/24 outturn is currently projected to be a deficit of £126,791;



- (2) to approve the indicative 2024/25 budget of £455,949 expenditure against projected income of £322,446 representing a budgeted deficit of £133,503;
- (3) to approve the inclusion of a budget of £53,465 in 2023/24 reducing to £31,494 in 2024/25 to fund ongoing security costs at 7 Overburn Ave;
- (4) to note the indicative budgets to 2026/27 as set out in Appendix 1;
- (5) to note the projected balances available for carry forward of £498,105 at 31 March 2024 and £364,602 at 31 March 2025 (based upon the revised draft 2024/25 budget); and
- (6) to note that a comprehensive review of the recurring annual grant awards will be carried out during 2024/25.

The meeting closed at 8.03 p.m.