

## **SCHOOL BUDGET FORUM MEETING 4<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2021**

### **THE COUNCIL'S DRAFT 2021/2022 REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY**

#### **Extract from minutes**

The Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services provided Forum Members with a PowerPoint presentation which provided an overview of:

- The 2021/22 Draft Revenue Budget Strategy;
- The Council's current financial position (2020/21);
- Details of the budget consultation (phase 1); and
- The headlines and implications for the Council in respect of the provisional Local Government Settlement 2021/22.

The Service Director concluded the presentation with the Cabinet's proposed budget strategy for 2021/22 and requested feedback from Forum Members.

#### **Council Tax**

Forum Members were advised that the Cabinet were proposing Council Tax be increased by 2.65% for 2021/22 (lower than the originally modelled Council Tax increase of 2.85%) at a cost of £182k to the Council.

Members commented positively on the proposed Council Tax level, noting that the level proposed would likely be one of the lowest in Wales.

#### **Schools Budget**

The Service Director informed Forum Members that the proposal would see the Schools Budget increase from £161.6M to £163.8M, an increase of £2.2M. He added that the increase would cover, in full, all inflationary and pupil number pressures, including NDR increased costs.

Members welcomed the proposal to cover inflationary and pupil number pressures and NDR increased costs.

#### **Efficiencies**

The Service Director informed Members that for 2021/22, efficiencies totalling £4.6M had been identified for incorporation into the proposed strategy that would not impact on frontline services.

Forum Members spoke of the efficiencies identified and considered it a positive that the proposed savings would not impact on front-line services. The Service Director commented on the areas where such efficiencies had been secured, that included savings through the transformational changes implemented during the pandemic such as maximising use of digital technology to reduce consumable expenditure and home working that is reducing staff travel and premises related costs.

A Forum Member commented on the difficulties of achieving such efficiency levels year-on-year and paid tribute to the work of staff and the Senior Leadership Team in this regard.

### **Fees & Charges**

Forum Members were advised that a standard increase of 1.7% (in line with the forecasted Consumer Prices Index) was proposed on all fees and charges with a number of specific exceptions, which the Service Director highlighted within his presentation. He added that the proposals would cost the Council £185k more than if the Council increased all fees and charges by 1.7%.

Forum Members welcomed the freeze in charges on school meals and also commented on the importance of free school meals to the families that they support. Forum Members spoke of the importance of leisure facilities and the need to promote recreation and exercise for all residents in the County Borough following the pandemic and the health and mental health benefits such facilities provide; therefore freezing the prices in this area to help ensure such facilities were accessible was another positive measure.

### **Proposed Targeted Additional Investment**

A Forum Member queried whether any additional investment had been received from Welsh Government in respect of flood prevention support. The Service Director advised that the Welsh Government provided funding through its Emergency Financial Assistance Scheme to support the Council in its immediate response to Storm Dennis and work is on-going with Welsh Government to secure further funding to support a medium to long term programme of repairs to the Council's infra-structure, including flood prevention schemes. The Service Director added that with specific regard to the flood prevention support investment of £50k included in the proposed budget strategy, this related to putting in place an advisory role to help ensure residents and businesses are supported in protecting themselves from future storm damage.

A Forum Member also highlighted that the Council's on-going work in improving playgrounds and parks facilities was important, and more so during the pandemic, giving young people good quality areas to play that helps promote both health and wellbeing benefits.

### **Use of Reserves**

The Service Director advised that after taking account of the implications of Cabinet's budget strategy proposals, the remaining budget gap would be £0.709M. The Service Director informed Forum Members that it is proposed for an allocation of £0.709M be made from the Council's Transitional Funding which would leave a remaining balance of £3.621M.

Members discussed the need to utilise the Transitional Funding reserve to close the budget gap and spoke of the importance of the Transitional Fund going forward and commented on the prudent work of the Council in being able to maintain this funding at an appropriate level on an on-going basis.

The Chair thanked Members for their contribution to the meeting and the Service Director closed the presentation by advising of the timeline for setting the Council's 2021/22 Revenue Budget and noted that the feedback of Forum Members would form part of the report to Cabinet at its meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021.