

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee meeting held on Thursday, 10 February 2022 at 12.00 pm

Joint Consultative Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor A Crimmings – Cabinet Member for Environment, Leisure & Heritage
Councillor R Lewis - Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Communities
Councillor R Bevan - Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development & Housing
Mr C Jones, Representing GMB
Mr P Crews, Representing Unison
Ms L Davies, Representing Unite Teaching Unions:
Mr M Cleverly - The Teacher's Union (NASUWT)
Ms Mererid Lewis Davies - Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)

Officers in attendance

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Mr R Evans, Director of Human Resources
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

Extract from the minutes

2. BUDGET CONSULTATION 2022/23 (PHASE 2)

The Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services provided Members with a Powerpoint presentation on the Council's Phase 2 Budget Consultation for 2022/23 and covered the following areas:

- Introduction – 2022/23 Draft Revenue Budget Strategy
- Council's Current Financial Position (2021/22)
- Phase 1 Budget Consultation – Headlines
- Provisional Local Government Settlement 2022/23 – Headlines/Implications for Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Cabinet Proposed Budget Strategy 2022/23
- Next steps and key dates

The Service Director concluded his presentation by informing the Committee that the feedback provided by consultees as part of the Phase 2 process will be reported to Cabinet on the 28th February 2022 as part of the Cabinet finalising its recommended budget strategy for the forthcoming year.

Members of the Committee thanked the Service Director for the overview and provided the following comments for consideration by the Council's Cabinet.

Council Tax increase

Members fed back their support for the proposed 1% increase in Council Tax if this would ensure that services and jobs would be protected, and noted that an increase was part of the proposed strategy to enable a balanced budget to be set. Members also noted the rising cost of living for households across the County Borough many of which were Trade Union members.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Communities commented that the budget setting process is a balancing act, recognising the need to continue to deliver good quality services alongside residents' ability to pay. The Cabinet Member went on to indicate that the settlement from Welsh Government is more favorable than the Council had modelled, noting that this does follow 10 years of austerity, and emphasized that the indicative funding levels for years 2 and 3 included in the Settlement represent a challenge for the Council as services continue their recovery out of the pandemic and rising cost pressures for both residents and the local authority. The Cabinet Member added that in order to protect vital frontline services, a proposed 1% increase in Council Tax is the right approach to adopt.

Schools Budget

Members agreed that the Council should fully fund schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf and recognized the financial pressure they are facing, for example, the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act. Members also fed back that the proposed position is positive and noted that some schools may still be faced with financial pressures to manage.

Members expressed concern that the Welsh Government Hardship Fund will cease at the end of the current financial year, even though it is likely that schools will face additional on-going costs as recovery from the pandemic continues, for example, staff absences that need to be covered with supply staff. Members asked for clarity how the hardship fund is awarded to schools and what further support could be provided to schools.

The Service Director fed back that the full year forecasted additional costs and income losses that will be incurred by the Council (including schools) as a direct result of the pandemic for 2021/22 is £30M and is reimbursed to the local authority by Welsh Government on a claims basis, noting that the claims submitted are based on actual expenditure and income losses incurred. The Service Director added that the proposed 2022/23 budget strategy has allocated all available funding to school and non-school service areas, and the Council will continue to work closely with schools to identify cost saving opportunities; ensuring school reserve levels are optimised to provide some flexibility to meet in-year cost pressures during the next financial year; and continue its dialogue with Welsh Government to explore all potential additional funding opportunities.

Social Services Funding

Members were supportive of the £15M allocation of additional funding for Community and Children's Services and the proposal for the minimum rate of pay to increase to £10

per hour, above the Real Living Wage rate of £9.90 per hour. Members went on to indicate that the pressures across social care are unprecedented and requested clarity on where the funding is proposed to be allocated, linked to its adequacy to meet all requirements, and noted that the challenges being faced are the same across Wales. One Member added that they would like consideration to be given to bring services fully in-house, for example, domiciliary care, and assurance was requested around commissioned social care providers passing on the £10 per hour minimum rate of pay to its employees.

The Service Director fed back that the proposed allocation of the £15M additional funding relates to £10M to Adult Social Care, nearly £4M to Children's Services and over £1M for Community Services that includes services such as Public Health and Protection, Libraries and Leisure Services, and added that subject to approval of the budget, Services will be allocating the funding to the required areas. With regard to commissioned service providers paying their staff the £10 minimum rate of pay, the Service Director fed back that the Council will be continuing to work closely with providers, as part of their funding arrangements, to ensure that the payment at the increased rate is in place.

Efficiency savings

A Member requested assurance that there will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of the proposed efficiency savings and another Member requested that where efficiency savings are planned, that this information is provided to Trade Union representatives to enable potential impacts to be understood and discussed.

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services fed back that the £4.9M efficiency savings proposed to be incorporated into the 2022/23 budget strategy have been reviewed and challenged internally and assurance is in place that they are deliverable and do not impact on frontline services. The Service Director went on to indicate that the proposed efficiency savings for 2022/23 include approved staffing restructures, ensuring full cost recovery of services, on-going effective deployment of the Council's procurement strategy, additional rental income and reductions in consumable budgets.

The Director of Human Resources also provided specific feedback in respect of no compulsory redundancies, indicating that this is the commitment rather than a guarantee, and the Council and Trade Unions have a good track record of working together to achieve this. The Director added that the Council is fully committed to continuing this approach into the future.

Members asked if buildings that are surplus to requirements have been considered for efficiencies due to the number of staff now working from home.

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services fed back that the 2021/22 budget strategy included building operating cost savings as a result of services revising their operating arrangements due to the pandemic. The Service Director added that a Built Asset Review is currently underway taking into account current and future service needs and on-going revisions to working arrangements, and indicated that the outcome of this work will help inform the Council's medium to long term asset / building requirements in line with service need and ensure continued efficient use of resources.

Fees and Charges

Members were generally supportive of the standard increase to fees and charges and specific charges being frozen on the basis of the proposals protecting jobs, for example, in Leisure Services, and that pricings remain competitive.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Change & Communities fed back that the strategy in respect of Leisure Services is to keep pricing competitive alongside a high quality offer, and although there had been a drop in Leisure membership during the pandemic as a result of facilities being closed / restricted use of facilities, he reassured Members that the Service is working hard to attract back previous members and also new members.

Targeted Investment

Members were supportive of the targeted investment proposals and fed back they are critical areas and help the Council to secure jobs. Members noted that the £25 charge for pest control services and suggested that this could be a means tested charge to support families on low incomes, with reference made to challenges a specific community were facing, but still recognising there needs to be a charge for the service.

The Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development & Housing stated that work is on-going to ensure people are encouraged to take litter home and are made aware of the impact of fly tipping, and also the continuation of close working with public sector partners to help combat this issue. The Cabinet Member indicated that the approach to charging could be considered and noted that the principle of continuing to apply a competitive charge for the service is a responsible way forward.

A Member also requested clarity around whether the additional funding to increase the minimum rate of pay to £10 per hour also included any implications of maintaining pay differentials. The Service Director fed back that the £550k proposed additional investment related specifically to the £10 per hour minimum rate of pay and any pay differential implications would be considered with the relevant service areas, as required.

Use of Reserves

Members were supportive of the proposal to use £970k from transitional funding to bridge the funding gap in the proposed budget strategy and requested feed back on the impact on the level of Council Tax if transition funding was not used. Another Member requested clarity on if the provisional Local Government Settlement was likely to change as part of the final settlement announcement.

The Service Director fed back that Council Tax would need to increase by approximately an additional 1% based on the option of not using transition funding and funding the gap from Council Tax. With regard to the provisional settlement, the Service Director indicated that whilst there is the possibility of the settlement changing at the final settlement stage, the indications from Welsh Government are that this is unlikely to be the case.