

SCHOOL BUDGET FORUM
(DRAFT MINUTES – SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY THE SCHOOL BUDGET FORUM)

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the School Budget Forum held on Thursday 24
November 2022 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT	<p>Councillor R Lewis (Chair) Councillor G Caple Councillor C Leyshon Councillor A Morgan Councillor M Norris Councillor M Webber</p> <p>Ms B Cheetham, Y Pant Comprehensive Mr C Coole, Darran Park Primary School Ms S Mitchell, St Johns Baptist CiW School Mr D Mogford, Maesgwyn Special School Mr P Morgan, Cwmaman Infants/Glynhafod Juniors Ms G Powell, Glenboi Primary School Mr A Roberts, Parc Lewis Primary School Mr C Spanswick, Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhondda Ms R Shellard, Cwmbach CiW Primary School Ms J Conway, Our Lady's RC Primary Ms N Poole, Blaengwawr Primary School Mr J Davies, Penygawsi Primary School Mr D Jones, Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Castellau Mr A Llewellyn, Gwaunmeisgyn Primary School</p> <p>Mr M Cleverley, NASUWT Rep Ms D Gibbons, Chair RCT GA Mr M Thomas, NEU Rep</p>
IN ATTENDANCE	<p>Ms G Davies Ms S Davies Ms C Edwards Mr P Griffiths Mr S Mithan Ms E Edmunds Mr C Hanagan Ms A Winter</p>
APOLOGIES	None.

Item ID	23324
Item Title	DECLARATION OF INTEREST
Summary	In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct there were no declarations pertaining to the agenda.

Item ID	23325
Item Title	APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE
Summary	None.

Item ID	23326
Item Title	MINUTES
Summary	The minutes of the meeting of the School Budget Forum held on the 29 th September 2022, were approved as an accurate record.

Item ID	24552
Item Title	BUDGET CONSULTATION 2023/24 (PHASE 1)
Summary	<p>The Leader provided Members of the School Budget Forum with an overview of the preparatory work being undertaken by the Council as part of 2023/24 budget setting and explained that the current planning assumptions for schools is a proposed uplift of 6%+ that would equate to additional funding to schools of over £10M. The Leader acknowledged the very challenging environment that schools are operating within and provided assurance that the Council will be doing all it can to maximise the level of funding it allocates to schools, taking into account the provisional funding level the Council will receive from Welsh Government that will be announced in December 2022.</p> <p>The Leader informed School Budget Forum Members that the Council has published service change proposals in respect of moving to 3-weekly refuse collections and also the Meals on Wheels Service, this reflecting the very difficult financial outlook facing the Council, and these will be considered by Cabinet shortly to determine whether to proceed with consultation processes in relation to the proposed changes. The Leader also fed back that other proposals will need to be considered, due to the unprecedented budget gap facing the Council next year, and that the Council continues to work closely with Trade Union colleagues and has undertaken to do everything possible to avoid compulsory redundancies.</p> <p>The Leader indicated that the letter he circulated to all schools in October 2022 aimed to provide context on the very challenging financial outlook facing the Council, with an overspend for the current year projected to be £21M, driven by significant inflation and demand pressures, increased energy and contractor costs and the likelihood of a higher than budgeted 2022/23 pay award. The Leader also indicated that the projected funding gap for 2023/24 was over £35M, and, by way of comparison, the highest annual funding gap during austerity was in the region of £24M, this providing a clear picture on the size of the challenge. The Leader informed Forum Members of the proactive steps the Council is taking to address this</p>

position, including specific measures to reduce in-year expenditure by £1.5M, and urged Forum Members to ensure all possible steps are taken by schools to reduce spend in the current year. The Leader concluded the update by providing Forum Members with the opportunity to send through specific questions which would then be discussed outside of the meeting.

The Chair thanked the Leader for setting out a clear picture of the financial outlook and re-affirmed the commitment of the Council to continue to work in partnership with schools and explore all opportunities to maximise the level of funding provided to the sector.

The Chair then invited the Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services to present the phase 1 2023/24 Budget Consultation agenda item, via the aid of a PowerPoint presentation.

The Service Director provided an overview of the Council's 2022/23 financial position and outlook over the medium term; general approach for 2023/24 (in respect of the phase 1 budget consultation process); 2023/24 Budget Setting – key strategic building blocks; the Council's Priorities; and Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS). The Service Director indicated that the overview of these areas intended to assist Forum Members in formulating their feedback as part of the 2023/24 Budget Consultation process.

Forum Members were requested to provide feedback on the following areas:

Schools Budget

The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools?' and 'Do you think an efficiency saving should be built into the schools budget?'

A Forum Member fed back support for the Council to provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in schools and with regard to whether an efficiency saving should be built into the school budget, the Forum Member fed back that this is not supported but recognised it was a measure that the Council needs to consider taking into account the very challenging financial outlook. The Forum Member also requested feedback on where school priorities should be, linked to the funding pressures, and sought assurance that there are no areas within the Council that would be protected from the requirement to deliver budget savings.

Another Member supported this feedback and noted that whilst schools recognise and appreciate the Council is doing all it can to support the sector, the funding proposal for schools will mean not all services could continue to be provided or provided at the same level.

The Chair thanked the Forum Members for their feedback and reiterated the unprecedented financial challenges facing the Council, that schools would continue to be prioritised by the Council in the context of the funding available to it and that all Council service areas are being subject to review to identify further budget saving options.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services fed back that the priorities of the Council and schools are aligned in terms of leadership, high quality teaching and learning, improving the outcomes for all learners including the most disadvantaged and disengaged learners, supporting vulnerable children and the wellbeing of learners and staff. The Director also fed back that the Council and Schools will continue to work closely together, recognising the very challenging operating environment, to ensure the on-going efficient and effective use of resources. The Director added that in terms of Council services, all areas are subject to review and challenge to identify and deliver budget savings, and no services are protected.

Social Care

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the Council should continue to prioritise social services as a key area for additional investment?'

A Forum Member fed back their support to continue to prioritise social services as a key area for additional investment.

Fees and Charges

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the requirement for fees and charges to be reviewed individually and the continued need to take into account the impact on service users is a reasonable approach (and not apply an across-the-board increase in line with the 12 month CPI rate (as at Oct 22) of 11.1%?'

Forum Members did not have any specific feedback to provide in respect of fees and charges.

Service levels

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'What service areas provided by the Council are important to you?' and 'Do you think the Council should consider changing the level of services for any of these and if so how? For example, reviewing the frequency that services are provided, or opening times, depending how often services are used?'

A Forum Member fed back the important link between Schools and Children's Services, noting the pressures both services are currently under,

and this position should be taken into account as part of the budget setting process.

Another Forum Member fed back that in the context of the support from the Council being very much valued, value for money reviews for specific services should be undertaken to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Another Forum Member agreed with the important link between schools and Children's Services, and the challenging operating environment, and also fed back the importance of leisure services and school swimming provision in supporting life skills and mental health. The Forum Member indicated that Leisure Services should be protected.

Council Tax

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the Council should increase Council Tax next year by '0% to 3%', 'between 3% and 5%' or '5%+'?' and 'The level of Council Tax versus maintaining or reducing service levels?'

A Forum Member fed back they would look to protect services and increase Council Tax by 3% to 5%, and other Forum Members indicating their support to increase Council Tax by 3% to 5%. Another Forum Member fed back that the Council Tax increase should be as low as possible as an increase would impact dramatically on all households, including middle income householders.

Efficiencies

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you support the Council's strategy on efficiencies?', 'Do you think we should continue to expect our managers to deliver more efficient services?' and 'Are there any specific areas where you think the Council could be more efficient / any examples of Council Services not being efficient?'

Three Forum Members fed back that it was difficult to see how the Council could become more efficient and there needed to be realistic expectations in terms of the level of services that could continue to be delivered taking account of the forecasted funding position.

A Forum Member also fed back that efficiency savings will impact on staffing levels which will also impact on the range and level of services that can be delivered.

Another Forum Member fed back that the Council should be reasonable and proportionate in the allocation of budget reductions, taking into account those areas deemed as key priorities.

Council Reserves

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the Council should continue with its strategy around the management of reserves?'

Two Forum Members supported the purposes for which the Council is holding reserves.

Council Priorities

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on 'Do you think the Council should focus on the five key areas of digitisation, commercialisation, early intervention and prevention, Independence and Efficient and Effective Organisation to maximise resources and deliver improved services?'

Forum Members did not have any specific feedback to provide in respect of Council Priorities.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Service Director requested feedback from Forum Members on the following:

Extended Payments – 'Do you think that 4 weeks is a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work?'

A Forum Member fed back that they felt 4 weeks was sufficient. Another Forum Member fed back that it depended on individual circumstances and noted that the 4 weeks would be beneficial for some households. Another Forum Member requested further information on the position within other local authorities in order to be able to provide more informed feedback.

War disablement – 'Do you think that it is reasonable for the Council to continue to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to CTR Scheme?'

A Forum Member fed back that all areas need to be looked at, due to the very challenging financial position, and noted that continuing to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to CTR Scheme would have a positive impact on eligible individuals.

Another Forum Member indicated that further information on the position of other local authorities, as a comparison, would be helpful to inform providing feedback.

Another Forum Member fed back that War Disablement Pensions/War Widow's Pensions income should be totally excluded and felt that the Council needed to look at all areas of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, in light of the differing needs across the County Borough.

Backdating claims – 'Do you think that 6 months is a reasonable period to backdate claims for working age and pensioners?'

Forum Members did not have any specific feedback to provide in respect of Council Priorities.

The Service Director - Finance & Improvement Services concluded by thanking Forum Members for their feedback, noting that this will be collated and included in the information presented to the Council's Cabinet as part of developing a draft Budget Strategy for 2023/24.

The Chair thanked the Service Director and Forum Members for their contributions and reiterated the importance of the valued continued relationship between the Council and Schools.

Item ID	23327
Item Title	ANY OTHER BUSINESS
Summary	None.