



APPENDIX 4

SCHOOL BUDGET FORUM MEETING – 25TH JANUARY 2024

THE COUNCIL'S DRAFT 2024/25 REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY – PHASE 2 CONSULTATION

Extract from the minutes

BUDGET CONSULTATION 2024/25 (PHASE 2)

With the aid of a PowerPoint Presentation, the Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services provided Members with an update in respect of the Council's Budget Consultation 2024/25 and covered the following areas: Introduction – 2024/25 Draft Revenue Budget Strategy; The Council's Current Financial Position (2023/24); Phase 1 Budget Consultation – Headlines; Provisional Local Government Settlement 2024/25 – Headlines/Implications for Rhondda Cynon Taf; Cabinet Proposed Budget Strategy 2024/25; and Next steps and key dates.

Following the overview by the Service Director, Forum Members were informed that their feedback would be considered by Cabinet, alongside feedback received from all other stakeholders, as part of Cabinet meeting later in February 2024 to finalise its recommended Budget Strategy. As part of the overview, Forum Members were advised that the Leader of the Council, Councillor Morgan, has requested officers to explore additional one-off funding opportunities to be allocated to schools for the 2024/25 financial year, this being over and above the proposed school funding set out in the draft 2024/25 Budget Strategy.

Following this, Forum Members had the opportunity to ask questions. The Deputy Leader noted the difficulties presented by the on-going need to identify and deliver budget savings and emphasised that as a Council we are proud of our schools and will continue to provide support for education. The Deputy Leader also fed back that in the context of the very challenging financial outlook, the proposed Council Tax increase was fair; efficiency saving opportunities have once again been maximised and where service operational reconfigurations have been identified, these do not have a significant detrimental impact on frontline services; and the Council has a proven track record over many years of using its reserves sensibly to support the setting of balanced budgets. Forum Members did not feedback any further comments based on the position set out by the Council's Deputy Leader.

The Chair also fed back that at yesterday's Cabinet meeting, additional recommendations were agreed to amend the 'continuation of free breakfast club provision in primary and special schools with the introduction of a charge for the additional childcare element' proposal based on the public consultation feedback received, namely, to provide the additional option to access the provision for up to 3 days per week at £40 per term and a further category of concession whereby parents/carers would only pay for the first two children of primary age, living in the same household, accessing the provision. It was emphasised that the Council would

work in partnership with Schools as part of implementation arrangements, with the additional income generated ring-fenced and re-invested back into school budgets. In respect of the changes to Breakfast Club provision, a Forum Member noted that it will be a challenge logistically and raised concern around the possibility of increased workload for Headteachers. In respect of 2024/25 school budget information, the Forum Member queried when this would be communicated to schools. The Director of Education and Inclusion Services advised that in respect of free Breakfast Club and additional childcare provision, the team will make arrangements to progress implementation, subject to confirmation of the decision, and would include an on-line facility for parents / carers to make payments to ensure the process is as efficient as possible. In respect of school budget information, the Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services confirmed that information will be provided to schools as timely as possible, in line with agreed processes.

Discussions continued and a Forum Member queried whether efficiency savings would be included within the school budget formula. The Forum Member also noted that Schools have utilised reserves as part of budget setting for a number of years and could now be facing a deficit. The Member further queried if clarification could be provided on the funding of redundancies. The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services advised that in respect of efficiency savings, the Council will ensure transparency as part of the school budget formula, and in respect of funding of redundancies it was fed back that internal discussions are currently on-going.

Discussions ensued and a Member queried if teacher salaries would be fully funded. The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services confirmed this was the case. Another Forum Member queried the new grants system and the Service Director, Finance Services advised that families continue to be encouraged to apply for Free School Meal status to ensure they are eligible for Schools Essentials Grant. Discussion continued and a Forum Member emphasised that the issue with the grant is that it is dependent on parents applying. The Service Director advised that the team are currently working on a social media campaign to encourage parents to apply. The Chair acknowledged the concerns of Forum Members in respect of parents applying and advised that this has also been raised directly with the Welsh Government.

The Service Director – Finance Services added that in respect of the grant that replaces EIG, Welsh Government has committed to providing allocations by next week, with the requirement for the information to then be validated by local authority officers before distributing to schools.

Following discussion, the Service Director– Finance and Improvement Services thanked Forum Members for their time and feedback and advised on next steps and key dates.

The meeting closed at 3.09 pm.

Councillor R Lewis, Chair