



SPECIAL EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH
ON MONDAY, 9TH DECEMBER 2019 AT 5.30PM.**

PRESENT:

Councillor T. Parry - Chair
Councillor C. Andrews – Vice Chair

Councillors:

A. Collis, W. David, A. Farina-Childs, Mrs B. Miles, J.E. Roberts, J. Simmonds and R. Whiting.

P. Marsden – Leader and Cabinet Member for Education and Achievement

Together with:

R. Edmunds (Corporate Director – Education and Corporate Services), K. Cole (Chief Education Officer), S. Richards (Head of Education, Planning and Strategy), S. Harris (Interim Head of Business Improvement Services & Acting S151 Officer), P. O’Neil (Senior Youth Service Manager), J. Southcombe (Finance Manager), C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Manager) and C. Evans (Committee Services Officer)

Also Present:

Co-opted Members: Mr D. Davies (Caerphilly Governors Association), J. Havard (NEU) and Mr R. Morgan (Parent Governor).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P. J. Bevan, D. Hardacre, D. Havard, M.P. James, Mrs G.D. Oliver, R. and Mr M. Western (Cardiff ROC Archdiocesan Commission for Education Representative), M. Barry (Parent Governor Representative) and P. Ireland (NEU).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

3. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS 2020/21

The Committee welcomed Mr S. Harris, Interim Head of Business Improvement Services & Acting S151 Officer, who provided the Committee with an overview of the 2020/21 Draft Budget proposals report, which was presented to Cabinet on the 13th November 2019, and

provided some context to the financial challenges that the Authority continues to face due to the ongoing programme of austerity.

It was noted that details of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement are normally announced by the Welsh Government in early October each year. However, due to a combination of the continuing uncertainty around Brexit, the delay in undertaking the UK Government spending review, and the forthcoming General Election; the announcement of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement for 2020/21 has been delayed.

The Officer explained that at the time of writing the Draft Budget Proposals Report it was anticipated that the Provisional Settlement would be announced on the 26th November 2019. However, it has since been confirmed by the Welsh Government that details of the Provisional Settlement will not now be released until 16th December 2019.

To ensure that sufficient time is allocated to consult on the Council's draft budget proposals for 2020/21, Cabinet has endorsed the draft budget and associated savings proposals in advance of the announcement of the Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement.

The draft budget proposals have been used as a start point on the Medium-Term Financial Plan presented to Council on the 21st February 2019. This showed a projected 2020/21 savings requirement of £15.658m based on information available at that time. The projected position for 2020/21 has since been reviewed and based on updated information, and a revised set of assumptions, has resulted in an updated projected savings requirement of £8.485m, which is a reduction of £7.173m on the position reported in February 2019. The main reasons for this significant reduction in the savings requirement are:

- An assumed cash flat position in respect of the core funding we receive from the Welsh Government.
- An assumption that cost pressures in respect of Teachers Pensions will be fully funded; and
- A proposed increase in Council Tax of 6.95%

It was noted that details of the proposed savings totalling £8.845m were provided in Appendix 2 of the Cabinet report. Members were assured that in order to limit the impact on frontline services wherever possible, the focus has been on delivering efficiencies and through doing things differently. However, it will not be possible to achieve a balanced budget without having to make some difficult decisions and regrettably the Draft Budget Proposals do include proposed service reductions and cuts totalling £3.708m.

Officers explained that in terms of the financial outlook for future years the Medium Term Financial Plan presented to Council in February 2019 showed a potential savings requirement of £44m for the four-year period 2020/21 to 2023/24. Considerable uncertainty remains surrounding the funding position moving forward. The UK Government has completed a spending review for 2020/21 only at this stage, so there is no indication of likely funding levels in the medium to long-term. With this in mind the MTFP has been updated based on current information and a revised set of assumptions, which results in an anticipated savings requirement of £27m for the four-year period 2021/22 to 2024/24. Further details for which were outlined in Appendix 3 of the Cabinet report.

The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

A Member, in noting the budgetary pressures being faced by services, commended the Education Directorate for the commencement of the second phase of 21st Century Schools Band B proposals.

A Member sought further information around the withdrawal of School Crossing patrol sites that no longer meet the national standards criteria, as outlined on page 18 of the report.

Officers explained that the item would be discussed at the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee tomorrow, but explained that service is being proposed to be withdrawn from sites where the standards are not being met and there have been long-term vacancies, however concerns will be fed back to the lead Officer prior to the meeting.

A further query was raised in relation to whether an evaluation has been undertaken for schools in which the service has been withdrawn. Officers were not able to provide the information at the meeting, but the information would be circulated following the meeting.

Following consideration and discussion, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation in the report be approved. By a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and comments of the Education Scrutiny Committee be included as part of the formal consultation process.

4. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN – SAVINGS PROPOSALS FOR 2020/21

The report provided Members of the Education Scrutiny Committee with details of the Directorates 2020/21 savings proposals required to support the Authority's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

The report provided details of savings proposals for 2020/21 relating to Education, Lifelong Learning and Schools only. Members noted that the draft proposals were presented to Cabinet on 13th November 2019, allowing for a period of consultation prior to a final decision by Council on 20th February 2020.

The Committee were referred to the Directorates savings proposals for 2020/21, which included schools, and totalled £2.716m which were summarised into themes; Being more efficient – providing a proposed saving of £0.471m, Doing Things Differently – providing a proposed saving of £0.112m and Service Reductions/Cuts – providing a proposed saving of £2.133m. Further detailed breakdowns were provided within the Officer report.

The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Officers for the report and discussion ensued.

A Member, in considering the Medium Term Financial plan Savings Proposal Template at Appendix 3 of the report sought further information on the Gunning Principles. Officers agreed to send further information to the Committee following the meeting.

Discussions took place around the Youth Service and in noting that a report was brought to the previous meeting to approve the continuation of the pilot scheme for the Youth Service, concerns were raised around the implications of the cuts and impact on the pilot model. Officer explained that the pilot will continue to run, as per discussions at the last meeting, however, it is important to come to a decision in respect of a way forward for the Youth Service as the current arrangements are not sustainable long term. Members were assured that a roll out of the pilot scheme across the borough is affordable, as is the continuation of the current practice, however, a decision will be required in due course as to the preferred format for the service as it is not sustainable to run the youth service and pilot scheme simultaneously long term.

The Committee discussed the proposal to apply a 2% funding cut to the Schools budget and clarification was sought on the implications to schools. It was noted that the 2% reduction would be applied to the overall £2,060k budget, prior to the application of the formula, which is based on school size and number of pupils etc., to determine the overall budget per school. Further discussions took place around budget allocations and implications to individual schools, which are already under pressure to maintain a balanced budget, but Officers assured Members that work has been underway with Head teachers over recent months to assist and support schools.

A Member raised concerns for the wellbeing of both teaching and non-teaching staff, with additional pressures due to reducing budgets and loss of staff. Officers explained that this is for the school to manage, however, there are a number of initiatives being adopted and shared across schools such as 4pm finish Fridays and Wellbeing days, to ensure that staff are supported and happy.

Concerns were raised around the reduction in posts within the Music Service, and the implications this will have on a valued service. Officers explained that whilst this is not a statutory service, it is a valued service and the Council are committed to continue to support the service where possible. With regards to the budget proposals for the service, the post reductions are as a result of retirement and Members were advised that there has been a reduction in demand for teaching of traditional musical instruments. This provides an opportunity to reconfigure the types of teaching on offer to meet the increasing demands upon the service for modern popular music.

In discussing the proposals around the Library Service, concerns were raised around safety and lone working across the proposed sites. Officers explained that this proposal had been trialled in other sites successfully and therefore was felt appropriate. Officers also added that consideration was given to opening times and site location for the proposal and Health and Safety assessments have been undertaken, as well as full site inspections and panic buttons have been fitted where necessary. Members were assured that the proposal has been considered in order to maintain the service and current opening times as much as possible.

Members discussed the proposed final settlement and it was suggested that should the Council receive any additional funding that the proposed 2% funding reduction for Schools, be either reduced or withdrawn in order to reduce the budget pressures.

Following consideration and discussion and subject to a recommendation being made to Cabinet and Council that should any additional funding be received that priority is given to the Schools budgets to reduce or remove the proposed 2% budget reduction. By a show of hands, this was unanimously agreed.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet and Council that any additional Welsh Government Funding be allocated to the Education Directorate to reduce or remove the proposed 2% budget reduction for schools and that the comments of the Education Scrutiny Committee be noted as part of the formal consultation process.

The meeting closed at 6:26pm

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 24th February 2020 they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR