

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 - THURSDAY, 20 JANUARY 2022

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1
HELD REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON THURSDAY, 20 JANUARY 2022 AT 09:30**

Present

Councillor KL Rowlands – Chairperson

JPD Blundell	RJ Collins	SK Dendy	T Giffard
CA Green	M Jones	SG Smith	

Apologies for Absence

TH Beedle, DG Howells, M Hughes, RME Stirman, T Thomas and CA Webster

Registered Representatives

Rev Canon Edward Evans	Church in Wales
L Morris	Secondary School Sector

Officers:

Lucy Beard	Scrutiny Officer
Deborah Exton	Deputy Head of Finance
Lindsay Harvey	Corporate Director Education and Family Support
Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Carys Lord	Chief Officer - Finance, Performance & Change
Mark Shephard	Chief Executive
Kelly Watson	Chief Officer Legal, HR and Regulatory Services

Invitees:

Hannah Castle	Head Teacher, Cynffig Comprehensive School
Neil Clode	Head Teacher, Llangewydd Primary School
Councillor Huw David	Leader
Councillor Jane Gebbie	Cabinet Member Social Services and Early Help
Councillor Dhanisha Patel	Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations
Councillor Charles Smith	Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration

48. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Canon Edward Evans – Community Governor Bryntirion Comprehensive School
Lindsay Morris – Parent Governor Maesteg Comprehensive School
Councillor Jon-Paul Blundell – Community Governor Cefn Glas Infants School
Councillor Cheryl Green – Governor Bryntirion Comprehensive School and Trelales Primary
Councillor Jane Gebbie – LA Governor Mynydd Cynffig Primary School and Pil Primary School
Council Martyn Jones – Vice Chair Garw Federation and Chair of Interim Executive Board Ogmores Vale Primary School
Councillor Richard Collins – LA Governor Plasnewydd Primary School and Governor at St Mary's and St Patrick's Catholic Primary School
Councillor Dhanisha Patel – Governor Ogmores Vale Primary School and Coleg Cymunedol Y Dderwen Comprehensive School
Councillor Sorrel Dendy – Governor Blaengarw Primary School
Councillor Hywel Williams – Chair of Governors Abercerdin Primary School

49. **CORPORATE PARENTING CHAMPION NOMINATION REPORT**

The Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny presented a report that requested the Committee to nominate one Member as its Corporate Parenting Champion, to represent the Committee as an invitee to meetings of the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting.

The Chairperson invited nominations, following which it was

RESOLVED: That Councillor Kay Rowlands be nominated to represent the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee as an Invitee to meetings of the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting.

50. **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2022-23 TO 2025-26**

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change presented a summary of the report, the purpose of which was to present the Committee with the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-23 to 2025-26, which set out the spending priorities of the Council, key investment objectives and budget areas targeted for necessary savings. The strategy included a financial forecast for 2022-2026 and a detailed draft revenue budget for 2022-23.

The Chair thanked the Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change and Members asked the following questions:

A Registered Representative asked if having no increase in Council tax and having no 1% budget reduction for schools would cause an increase in future years.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained it was difficult to predict the financial certainty in years to come, but they were looking to protect and enhance the life chances of many people across the Local Authority. The challenge would fluctuate and as seen over the last two years there had been significant grant funding from Welsh Government to schools and local authorities. He advised they look at strategic spend and engage all partners within the school budget forum to make sure that budgets were managed well at school level. Regarding long-term financial changes he suspected it would be difficult for any of them to provide that certainty around long term planning.

The Chief Officer - Finance, Performance and Change responded that they did have some indicative figures from Welsh Government regarding percentage increases in the settlement for the following two years. She advised that, although difficult to forward plan detail beyond the next financial year, she could reassure that they were able to balance the budget on the current proposed budget for the coming financial year and as far as going forward, the 1% reduction was still in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. She confirmed that the document was reviewed regularly and as information becomes clearer regarding future years, they would be reviewing everything in that draft statement.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration advised that each year the 1% had not happened and had been put there as a baseline to work from when calculating figures that are not fully detailed until the draft settlement is received.

The Deputy Leader advised that the council tax was a balancing figure and the last element of the equation. It began with their gross budget, which they had professional officers advise them on what they need to effectively deliver services in the County Borough of Bridgend and then it was a statutory duty to balance the budget. They

identify where to get the money from to deliver those services over the next twelve months. He advised that they did not know what pressures they would face in future years, so the proposed Council Tax freeze for 2022-23 had little bearing on the level of Council tax to be set the following year.

The Chair questioned whether it was within their gift to look at the future years and take that into consideration when they looked at the Council Tax or was just the twelve months they were looking at.

The Deputy Leader responded that they had a Medium Term Financial Strategy which included indicative figures for the following four years, and that was where the 1% efficiency savings came in. They had to responsibly plan forward and therefore needed to have some indication of where those reductions were going to come from and referred to the difficulty of control over future emerging pressures.

The Leader advised they had always tried to project and forecast what the settlement would be in future years and therefore what the possible Council Tax increase would be. However, they did not know what inflation would look like, or what the pressures would be or what the settlement would look like next year. Even if Welsh Government could give them certainty around the settlement next year, it would depend on certainty from the UK Government which he thought difficult for them to make hard forecasts as that would depend on the global economy and all sorts of factors. He advised they were mindful of the cost-of-living crisis and the forecast around energy cost increases which would hit every household in the borough quite hard. They had been mindful of that when looking at the Council Tax proposal and what could be done to try and support residents in responding and coping with those increases.

A Member wished to make a general point that in Wales she hoped that future settlements would protect their schools from any further cuts.

The Leader responded that it was a view shared across the virtual chamber. He advised they would be progressing the School Modernisation Programme which would need revenue funding but had already been supported by full Council. He advised that in future years they would consider and prioritise additional pressures when identified.

The Chair read out a question raised at the COSC meeting on 19 January that it had been agreed would be asked at this meeting of SOSC 1. A Member raised that schools had received a significant amount of money via the hardship fund, which was coming to an end, and asked how much schools had claimed from that fund, how much was projected and would it be required going forward from that fund. They also queried if there would be enough money, how it was going to be split and were they in danger of penalising families who could not afford computers.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support assured Members that regarding access to ICT there had been a significant piece of work undertaken over the last two years with all the schools to make sure that any digitally excluded learners had been provided with the appropriate kit. He advised they had engaged with schools and were not aware of any pupil that did not have access to the appropriate kit. He advised that there had been significant grant funding that had gone into schools over the last two years to mitigate the risks of there being real challenges with their budgets and was something they had worked very closely on with the School Budget Forum. Going forward he advised there were some grants that would be made available by Welsh Government for certain things, but there were Terms and Conditions attached to those which schools would need to be cognisant of.

The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Future Generations reassured Committee Members that they had taken quick steps at the start of the pandemic to ensure that all learners had access to IT and the internet. She sought clarification about the Member's comments regarding the 1% School Budget.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny clarified that the Member's reference to the 1% had been in context, to the schools having received a significant amount of money from the hardship fund, and when it was removed if there was no alternative for schools to reclaim such expenditure, then money spent on deep cleans, hand sanitisers, computer equipment could leave less money to spend on education. She advised the Member had asked how much money schools had claimed from the hardship fund and how much was projected they would need to claim going forward, as they had expressed concerns about the sufficiency of the £1Min the draft Council Wide Budget and asked whether schools would be able to claim from it.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained they had looked strategically at a long-term vision for funding in schools and working with Welsh Government they had the hub infrastructure grant in place which had been established at the end of 2018-2019 and it looked at a seven-year strategic spend. He explained they did not just buy computers once and then they did not need to be replenished, schools needed to be aware of the total cost of ownership of equipment and that was something they had done with schools through ICT, as well as involving head teachers within the ICT Schools Strategy Group. The strategy was over seven years leading up to 2025 and was based on 50% contribution from schools and additional funding from Welsh Government, which supports and enabled the schools to plan for years ahead.

The Headteacher Cynffig Comprehensive School advised she thought schools were in a better position now to be supporting those pupils who were digitally excluded, and they continued to offer blended learning. She explained schools had taken money from the hardship fund and looking to the future had wondered how they were going to manage some of those costs but had been warned and discussed it and were beginning to think about their planning process. She explained they did not know what they were going to need, as it was hard to determine if they were going to need in the future what the hardship fund had provided, but they had been informed that they needed to consider it could cease and therefore were thinking of ways in which they could manage their budget to deal with the situation.

The Chair moved the meeting on to Appendix A and the budget pressures.

A Member asked given that the Home to School Transport Policy was such a budget pressure, what efficiencies had been looked at, whether only catchment review and safe routes to school, and what considerations had been given to bring any efficiencies forward.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised significant work had been done and a report had been taken to Cabinet two years ago upon a piece of work looking at consulting the public, upon five or six avenues regarding Home to School Transport Policy, catchment areas and more efficient routes. They had looked at how some of those concerns could be addressed along with provision of transport for learners with additional learning needs, so it had been a wide-ranging review. He advised Members that the outcome of a review undertaken by Welsh Government regarding general home to school policy was awaited before progressing any changes in the policy, but it was under constant review. He was aware it was a significant part of the budget and wanted to make sure they delivered effective services in line with the statutory responsibilities but also make sure it was financially sustainable.

A Member responded that although he understood they were waiting for the Welsh Government review, were they any closer to an end date.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that they did not have a definitive date, the Leader had approached and communicated with the Minister asking for information, but it was a significant piece of work, and they were engaging with a wide range of partners to make sure the review was comprehensive.

The Chair asked as it was quite a lot of money within the pressure, please could Members of the Committee be provided with a breakdown of this pressure total to the individual costs.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support agreed.

A Member referred to the Authority traditionally being one of the most generous authorities in Wales for Home to School Transport and asked if that was still the case. She was mindful that it came out of the Education budget and therefore impacted on school budgets.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support agreed they did offer a generous home to school transport arrangement. A tapering approach had been agreed by Cabinet back in 2015 so they were seeing that protected groups of learners as they got older were less reliant on the benefit and they had seen year on year less draw on the budget. One of the challenges he explained was the general cost of home to school transport had gone up, which was not particular to Bridgend and was a pressure being felt by all local authorities across the United Kingdom. He advised the key for them was to make sure they aligned themselves with Welsh Government policy and make sure they provide the best possible arrangements to ensure their learners are transported to school effectively and make sure it was financially sustainable.

The Leader advised that the biggest reason for the budget pressure was that cost of inflation which was being experienced right across the industry and right across Wales.

The Chair moved the meeting on to the EFS1 - the revenue implication for supporting the School Modernisation Programme. The Chair asked if they could be provided a more detail and why it was £500k indicative for 2023-24 and not proposed for 2022-23.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised the overall budget envelope was around £68M, there were two elements around £40-45M of capital and then the rest would be made up through revenue funding regarding the mutual investment model through Welsh Government. He explained they would draw down the funding for it in future years when those plans started to come to fruition, as they started to build schools. At that point they would increase their revenue costs in building those schools but as they were not currently being built, they were not in their budget lines. He explained the £500k would be payments against the capital they would need for the new schools going online.

The Deputy Head of Finance explained that the way in which they fund schools is not through the capital programme, the contractor would build the school and pay for it, and they would then pay for it over a period of 25 years through their revenue budget. She explained the dates were looking to fall within 2023-24 financial year, but this could slip so they were keeping their eye on it. In terms of how much they had to fund, they had not had that definitively agreed as it would depend on the price, who was building the school and the design so there were quite a lot of decisions to be made. However, Welsh Government would be funding 81% of the revenue cost, so their share would be 19% on an annual basis over the 25-year period.

The Chair referred to EFS2 - Welsh-medium Moderate Learning Difficulties Learning Resource Centre at Secondary school level, being down included as a pressure for one year and asked whether it would be core funding in future years.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that there was a statutory duty regarding Welsh-medium education, and they wanted to make sure that all learners, especially those with additional learning needs had their particular provision through their language choice. He explained in the first instance they would set it up and future budgets would be determined.

The Leader confirmed that there would be an ongoing core budget line with proposed increases but are only shown there in the first year and then in the core budget for future years. He explained once the Learning Resource Centre was established, it was anticipated that there would be no additional pressure as there would be a teacher and additional support there. So, they had identified a small amount of start up costs when kitting out the classroom which had been already budgeted for. The core budget would be for staffing costs which would be ongoing and built into the base budget going forward.

The Chair queried the £92k proposed in 2022-23.
The Leader clarified that was the cost of the teaching staff.

The Deputy Leader clarified that the proposed budget pressure would go into the base budget, so that would be recurring every year and goes into the budget going forward, unless indicated otherwise.

The Chair asked whether that was the same for EFS3 - the increase in demand on the Educated Other Than at School budget.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that it was a similar process, however, this was a particular pressure as they had noted, as they were looking into producing more bespoke packages for learners with particular needs. He explained they were trying to make sure they could provide the best possible care, advice, and education for those learners and that did mean some additional costs.

The Chair asked whether there had been additional students coming forward for home school learning since the pandemic began.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support responded that elective home education was a separate issue but yes it had increased.

A Registered Representative referred to EFS 4 – Resources required to support the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Educational Tribunal Act 2018 and asked if it was a direct result of legislation being passed by Welsh Government should the cost not be met by them rather than by the Local Authority.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support agreed there was a statutory duty placed on local authorities by this Act and he advised the proposals in the Act were welcomed and any additional support being given to learners especially those of the digital learning needs and refining the system should be welcomed. He advised they had received additional funding from Welsh Government, he did not have the exact figures to hand but could provide them. The challenge in the first couple of years of the Act coming into force was introducing it and the set up costs.

The Chair asked for confirmation on whether or not the additional funding had actually been identified for specifically that amount and would it be in future years, or would it be incorporated into the funding pot and not separately identified. As there was a fear it would get incorporated into the funding pot and they would not be able to understand whether it was provided by Welsh Government or not.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised he could not say it was directly related to that exact amount, he was not able to offer that assurance yet and would need to check. He explained they knew what was coming down the line for that year, but not for future years.

A Registered Representative asked if there was evidence of families purposely moving into the area for children to attend Heronsbridge School and Ysgol Bryn Castell.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that they had two excellent special schools and though it was potentially the case it was difficult to confirm. He advised they are keen to make sure that learners within the County Borough do not need to travel significant distances especially those with additional learning needs. The challenges, of course was that then reduces the number of places they can effectively release through other local authorities and hence that decreases their income generation possibilities in all schools, so it is a balance.

The Chair asked if a child had specifically moved to Bridgend to access the schools, whether there was an opportunity to speak with the neighbouring authority for assistance with funding that place going forward.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised they needed to meet those statutory requirements, which they did and were lucky within the Welsh community that they had a clear reciprocal agreement where the nature of recruitment was, they work with each other to provide those places as they can. There were obviously challenges but they had positive relationships and was not only about income but doing the best for learners wherever they live.

The Chair asked for a breakdown of costs for Budget Pressure ESF7 Investment in the Early Help Service, to ensure the full assessment process is completed, reduce waiting times for referrals and improve quality.

A Member referred to the impact long COVID had on people's lives, which would mean a reduction of people who were able to go back to work which could have a knock-on effect in education as well. She asked if this had been incorporated into potential pressures on budgets.

A Member referred to Budget Reduction Proposal EFS1 – Rationalisation of Adult Community Learning Service and asked whether adults who could not afford to pay the full amount for retraining were being supported and helped through different ways and other schemes.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that regarding subsidy one of the things they had seen over the last two years was they had done things differently, they had been able to reduce costs in some areas regarding Community Learning such as venue hire and undertaking courses digitally, so that had led to service efficiencies. He advised they did look at other areas and other support mechanisms to allow people who were under different circumstances to get back to work and not just adult learning as they had a number of schemes within the Communities Directorate that supported people getting into work. Regarding how they supported people more widely, they had received good feedback from a recent review, stating the services were

operating effectively and certainly supporting people in different circumstances with different skills. He advised the Member if there was anything they would like to see within the programme, to feed it back to him for consideration.

The Leader advised that they had agreed in Cabinet to sign up to the Connect Engaged Listening Transform Regional project which would give an extra £274k of funding from Welsh Government to support people who were out of work. Some of that funding would be used to support over 40 people with education and training and over 40 into life skills support. So adult education learning training would be funded through different routes, and they would work with people in the greatest need and vulnerable people.

A Member asked if conversations had started with schools regarding the 1% efficiency saving and were they being given the support they would need to make and fund that. He also asked the school representatives if they felt supported by the Authority if this cut needed to happen.

The Headteacher of Llangewydd Junior School advised that the 1% saving had been proposed for some time and had not come to fruition which they were grateful for. He explained that the majority of their costs were staffing costs and in terms of a 1% cut going forward it was too soon to consider for him on a personal level how those cuts would be made. If 1% efficiency for Schools did occur and they had to cut staff then they would inevitably be impacted, but he did not feel at that point in time under too much pressure to go down that route and the reason for that was there were so many imponderables in terms of pupil numbers and other things. However, he reiterated if it did happen that there would be an impact.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support advised that those were the challenges going forward as indicated, they knew what was coming and did a lot of work to forecast those but, there could be changes as the schools were aware that would affect school budgets. He advised they were mindful of budgets that had come in from Welsh Government grants which had been helpful over the previous two years. He reassured the Committee that schools managed their budgets carefully and the Headteachers were very capable and worked closely with the Local Authority to make sure that the spend was appropriate and targeted always to the need of the learners.

The Chairperson referred to Budget Reduction Proposal SCH1- Efficiency savings against School Delegated Budgets and asked if the reductions proposed for 2022-26 were not realistic whether they should remain.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support responded that it was important to keep an eye on this and as with all services they had a duty to make sure that they delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible. He thought their main goal was to make sure the teaching and learning was of a high quality in Bridgend, so they had to balance that, and it was appropriate to make sure those ongoing discussions were held.

The Chairperson advised that Members of the Committee who wanted to ask questions had all spoken, so as there were no further questions for the invitees, she thanked them for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Following consideration of the report and appendices, the Committee made the following Recommendations for consolidation and inclusion in the report to Cabinet on the draft MTFs, including the proposed budget pressures and budget reduction proposals within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee, as part of the budget consultation process:

Recommendations:

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 - THURSDAY, 20 JANUARY 2022

1. The Committee supported the COSC recommendation made on 19 January 2022 for a robust review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Corporate Plan to be undertaken, as they were planned prior to the pandemic. The Committee requested that Cabinet be mindful of the consequences of the pandemic impact including learning catch up, the mental health of children and safeguarding issues when looking at this review, and the impact of potential future reductions on schools and teaching.
2. In relation to the indicative Budget Reduction SCH1 of 1% for 2023-24 to 2025-26, the Committee recommended that the Cabinet lobby Welsh Government regarding the detrimental effect Covid has had on children and their learning and the need to start examining and discussing funding for schools looking ahead, as Wales has the lowest funding per pupil in the UK and Bridgend is lower than some other Welsh Authorities, and the need to try to protect children's learning from future savings that could potentially impact on the effectiveness of teaching.
3. The Committee recognised the need to be able to plan ahead for future years in the MTFS and supported the recommendation proposed by COSC on 19 January 2022, that Cabinet write to Welsh Government urging them to set a multi year Medium Term financial Strategy budget settlement cycle of 3 or 5 years
4. The Committee recommended that consideration be given to the cost of living crisis to try to keep any future Council Tax increase to as minimal as possible
5. In relation to budget pressure EFS6, the Committee recommended that the Authority continue to lobby Welsh Government for the awaited WG review of learner transport, in order to progress the outcome relating to this pressure for home to school transport.

51. URGENT ITEMS

None