

**Minutes of the meeting of the Ceredigion Schools Finance Forum,
held remotely via ZOOM on Monday, 6 February 2023**

Present: Councillor Wyn Thomas (Chair), Cabinet Member for Schools, Lifelong Learning and Skills; Councillor Bryan Davies, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Democratic Services, Policy, Performance and People and Organisation; Councillor Endaf Edwards, Chair of Learning Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee; Meinir Ebbsworth, Corporate Lead Officer: Schools and Culture; Duncan Hall, Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement; Geraint Edwards, Corporate Lead Officer: People and Organisation; Peter Leggett, Head Teacher, Rhydypennau Primary School and Stephen Cooper, Parent Governor, Ysgol Bro Pedr.

Also in attendance: Neris Morgans, Democratic Services Officer and Sian Jones, Translator.

(6.00pm – 6.55pm)

1. Apologies

- i. Chris Macey, Service Accountant- CLO Support apologised for his inability to attend the meeting.
- ii. Mike Carruthers, Head Teacher, Comins Coch Primary School; Carol Davies, Head Teacher, Dyffryn Cledlyn Voluntary Controlled Primary School; Mair Hughes, Head Teacher, Penglais School; Owain Jones, Head Teacher, Aberaeron Comprehensive School; Catryn Lawrence, Head Teacher, Penrhyncoch Primary School; Meinir Lewis, Head Teacher, Llechryd Primary School and Dorian Pugh, Head Teacher, Ysgol Henry Richard apologised for their inability to attend the meeting.
- iii. Gary Davies, Parent Governor, Ciliau Parc Primary School and Chris Evans, Parent Governor, Cardigan Secondary School apologised for their inability to attend the meeting.

2. Disclosure of personal interest

Councillor Bryan Davies declared a personal interest as a family member worked in a Ceredigion local authority school.

3. To confirm the Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 July 2022

It was **RESOLVED** to confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2022 as a correct record.

4. Matters arising from the Minutes

None.

5. Overall Corporate Position

The Chair explained that despite a better settlement than in the previous years, the budget remained challenging due to several factors such as inflation and increased fuel prices.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Finance Procurement provided a presentation outlining the following:

- Cabinet Meeting and Budget Report 24/01/23
- Budget Assumptions and Uncertainty
- Estimated Budget Pressures 2023/24
- Proposed Budget Savings 2023/24
- Council Tax Considerations 2023/24

6. Schools Delegated Budget

The Corporate Lead Officer: Finance Procurement provided a presentation outlining the following:

- Budget Context
- Update Issued to all Schools 31/01/23
- Additional £1.1m Capital Grant Funding
- 23/24 Budget: Next Steps

It was noted that the final budget decision would take place at the Full Council Meeting on 02.03.2023.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement for providing an overview of the budget, and for the department's work in preparing the papers so diligently.

The Leader of the Council also expressed his thanks to the Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement for presenting the information in a clear and understanding manner. The budget setting had been a concern since May 2022, and despite a better-than-expected settlement, the schools' budget had been on the Cabinet's minds to ensure a high level of education was maintained. In the previous administration, some councillors had suggested reallocating funding from schools to the elderly, however, this was not passed. Additional funding for schools was important but the budget setting remained challenging for all departments. The figures recommended in the papers were proposed by the Cabinet, however, other recommendations could be proposed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees due to be held later in the week.

The Corporate Lead Officer: School and Culture stated that the schools had a challenging time ahead and school reserves, which were historically high, varied considerably between schools. Apart from a £1.1 million capital funding grant, there was no indication of further grants at present. Numerous grants had been available during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it seemed that this period had come to a standstill. Significant challenges remained following Covid-19 and school Governing Bodies would have difficult decisions to make in moving forward.

In response to a query from Stephen Cooper related to the £2.3 million savings earmarked for schools out of the £8.8 million proposed budget savings, the Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement clarified that the percentage of savings allocated for schools varied from year to year. It was looked at from a corporate perspective, and several factors were considered including cost pressures.

Stephen Cooper noted that the grants during Covid-19 were beneficial but were not sustainable given the economic climate.

The Leader of the Council explained that as pupil numbers similar to the county's population had decreased, this impacted the level of Revenue Support Grant (RSG) funding the local authority received. Typically, a local authority received 80% RSG with the remaining 20% of the budget funded through Council tax, but in Ceredigion, 73% was provided via the RSG and 27% from Council tax.

Peter Leggett noted that naturally, head teachers would prefer to have the budget as soon as possible to plan forward and to ensure pupils had access to the best education and it was frustrating when grants were awarded late in the year. It was evident that there were significant pressures on the Council's budget and that schools received large proportions of the budget. He queried what the primary school structure review involved.

The Corporate Lead Officer: School and Culture explained that if there was a reduction in school funding, a review of the schools' infrastructure needed to be undertaken. Initially, a set of core principles would be agreed upon in terms of sustainability. A post-16 education provision review was currently underway, but the primary review was yet to commence. Following the Cabinet meeting arranged for 14.02.23, the department would be able to proceed with the school draft budget, which would be finalised following the Full Council meeting on 02.03.23.

The Leader of the Council stated that the challenges related to late grants had previously been raised with Welsh Government ministers. In terms of infrastructure, the Council's policy in the past was to close primary schools with fewer than 20 pupils on the school register, however, this policy was no longer in place. Schools with fewer than 20 pupils were encouraged to be proactive. It was highlighted that the pupil's experience was a priority.

Peter Leggett stated that as school budgets decreased, not only did schools struggle to retain staff but less maintenance and improvements were likely to be undertaken, which led to a deterioration in the schools' infrastructure. He highlighted that pupils in 21st-century schools such as Ysgol Bro Teifi had the best resources following an investment. Consideration should be given to ensuring pupils in the North of the county had access to the same level of resources.

The Corporate Lead Officer: School and Culture advised that the budget included the maintenance of schools and repair and maintenance grants had been very beneficial in the past. Corporately, there was a 3, 6 and 9-year plan to oversee the capital investment in schools and there was a maintenance programme in place. It was reported that there were difficulties attracting businesses to tender for work. At present, the capital funding from Welsh Government did not appear to be too impacted as long as plans were in place.

The Leader emphasised that investing in teachers and staff was very important, along with listening to their views.

7. Any other business

Concerns were raised following recent negative comments in the media by a Governor of Ysgol Henry Richard related to the Welsh Language. It was noted that officers and school staff worked tirelessly to promote the Welsh language in schools.

The Chair expressed his thanks to the officers for their work and noted that the schools' budgets would follow as soon as possible.

8. Date of next meeting

Date of the next meeting to be circulated in due course.