

**Minutes of the meeting of the Ceredigion Schools Finance Forum held
remotely via ZOOM on Thursday, 9 May 2024**

PRESENT: Councillor Wyn Thomas, Cabinet Member for Schools, Lifelong Learning and Skills; Councillor Endaf Edwards, Chair of Learning Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee; Enid Brophy, Head Teacher: Ysgol Gynradd Gatholig Padarn Sant; Lee Burrows, Head Teacher: Ysgol Cenarth & Llechryd; Peter Leggett, Head Teacher, Ysgol Gynradd Rhydypennau; Carys Morgan, Head Teacher: Ysgol Bro Pedr and Dorian Pugh, Head Teacher: Ysgol Henry Richard.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Elen James, Chief Education Officer and Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning; Clive Williams, Corporate Lead Officer: Schools; Duncan Hall, Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement; Gwion Dafydd, Corporate Manager: Accountability and Progress; Carys Fowles, Assistant Accountant and Neris Morgans, Democratic Services Officer.

(4.26pm – 5.03pm)

1. Apologies

- i. Councillor Bryan Davies, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Democratic Services, Policy, Performance and People and Organisation apologised for his inability to attend the meeting due to other Council commitments.
- ii. Carol Davies, Head Teacher, Ysgol Dyffryn Cledlyn; Mair Hughes, Head Teacher: Ysgol Penglais; Catryn Lawrence, Head Teacher: Ysgol Penrhyncoch & Penllwyn and Owain Jones, Head Teacher: Ysgol Gyfun Aberaeron apologised for their inability to attend the meeting.

2. Disclosure of personal interest

There were no disclosures of personal interests.

3. To confirm the Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 February 2023

It was **RESOLVED** to confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2023 as a correct record.

4. Matters arising from the Minutes

None.

5. Overall Corporate Position

The Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement explained that a meeting had been held on 27 September 2023 at the Council Chamber for all of Ceredigion's Headteachers and Chair of Governors to provide an update on matters related to finance, which superseded the forum.

The 2024/2025 budget-setting process had been challenging for all involved. Full Council had agreed to a 11.1% Council Tax increase along with around 70 budget reductions worth approximately £5.8m which would need to be closely monitored during the year. These included Parking on

the prom/new car parking fees in Aberystwyth, Day & Respite Services review, work on Out of County Childrens' placements and Closer to Home project and Hafan y Waun residential care home. From a schools' perspective, Welsh Government had only increased the core funding by 2.9%, however, Ceredigion's schools were awarded a 3.1% increase in their budgets, which reflected the Council's commitment to education and meant no change to the position outlined in September.

In the medium term, the outlook appeared very challenging, and modelling suggested that the settlement from Welsh Government will either be 0% flat to a 1% increase. The uncertainty of when the General Election would be held was another factor to consider. The Post-16 and Primary School infrastructure reviews were ongoing, and it was evident that the Council were unable to continue to offer the range of services that were provided to the public.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning stated that it was a very concerning time, and as the Chief Education Officer, she met regularly with other colleagues across Wales and it was a similar story across the country. All local authorities found it increasingly difficult to deliver the teaching and learning they hoped to deliver when there was a constant decrease in grants and budgets. Between 2020-2022, school reserves appeared healthy as large amounts of funding were provided during the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, but schools were again feeling the pinch similar to pre-Covid-19.

6. Schools Delegated Budget

The Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement explained that the closing of the accounts for 23/24 was nearly ready, and early indications suggested that the Delegated School Balances in Ceredigion was circa £3.8m as of 31/03/24, compared to £5.1m on 31/03/23 and £8.3m on 31/03/22. This compared to a pre-Covid position of typically c£1.8m. The decline was not too dissimilar to the national position where £304m of School Balances b/f on 31/03/22 declined to £208m as of 31/03/23. All schools had individual challenges and one school had a small deficit as at 31/03/23. The support provided by Officers in Finance and Procurement, People and Organisation and by the Schools Service to Headteachers and Governors was fully acknowledged and commended.

Reference was provided to the Voluntary Early Redundancy form and the more robust processes in place, to ensure there was public accountability for costs and to ensure a reasonable payback period could be evidenced.

Teachers' Pension Employer rate had increased to over 28% (worth £1.4m) and although Welsh Government had said it would be fully funded, this was not yet confirmed. The Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning added that during the recent WLGA conference, questions were asked regarding Teacher's Pension contributions. Welsh Government had said they were waiting for notification but were quite confident of the funding from the UK Government. A further meeting was planned for next week.

Discussions were ongoing between the Trade Unions and NJC with the APTC/NJC April 2024 Payaward. The Trade Unions had submitted a proposal for a 10% increase or £3,000 per SCP or whichever was greater. The local authority had budgeted for a flat £1,200 per SCP (c4% average) therefore anything greater than this would create significant challenges. In respect of the Teachers September 2024 Payaward, the budget assumed a 4% increase. Ministers had intervened in the last pay process for teachers, and although they had said it would be fully funded, only 92% was actually funded.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning explained that data on StatsWales revealed that Ceredigion was the second best with the level of schools delegated budgets last year.

7. Welsh Government grants- New 4 streams

It was noted that from April 2024, the Welsh Government had combined over 20 different grants to one Local Authority Education Grant that contained 4 streams: Standards of Education, Reform, Equity and Cymraeg 2050. It was not anticipated that there would be much impact on the schools as the changes were more with the grant paper claims. The local authority had projected there would be a greater reduction in grants for 2024-25, but this had not been the case.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning highlighted the lack of consistency between each of the grants as there was less monitoring and reporting required for some of the grants. Welsh Government were yet to circulate some of the templates. It was noted that Welsh Government devised the formula and allocated a specific sum to each school rather than the local authority.

8. Re:fit Energy Scheme

The Corporate Lead Officer: Finance and Procurement stated that the local authority generally brought a large amount of energy in advance for the contract year that runs from October 2024 to September 2025. 70% was already brought for October 2024 onwards, and indications suggested that the price of electricity would reduce by 20% and gas by 30%, which would result in a part-year saving. Although the situation differed at each site, it was the general trend, and by the winter period, there should be a beneficial difference.

In addition, the local authority was working corporately with a partner Re:fit who would undertake a desktop exercise with a focus on energy efficiency. If findings found that there were opportunities to reduce carbon and cost, consideration would need to be given to finding a financing / investment model that worked for the local authority.

9. Any Other Business

Peter Leggett noted that most schools were going through a redundancy process, and it was appropriate to note that Headteachers had concerns with the delegated budget and the impact this had on schools. From his

perspective, they were losing teaching assistants, there were concerns with intervention, children's IDPs and the possibility of being summoned legally. He added that as Headteachers and Senior Leaders would likely take up more teaching, their capacity to deal with other matters would be impacted. In addition, there was a concern with how schools would be able to fund training opportunities and resources.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Lifelong Learning stated that the comments were valid. It was a concern in moving forward as more pupils required interventions and additional support from an early age. From a budget perspective, teaching assistants were often considered first when savings were required, however, she appreciated that the local authority could put themselves in a vulnerable position in the event of a tribunal.

The Corporate Lead Officer: Schools explained that he accepted the comments. Two Headteachers had shared their concerns with him around not only the difficulty in setting budgets this year but that next year would be more challenging again, with fewer options to explore.

The Corporate Manager: Accountability and Progress stated that from an admissions perspective, if reception classes were more than 30 in number in the past, the local authority would ask the school to change things internally as Welsh Government would write to explain that it was illegal to have more in a class. More recently, given the challenges schools had with less staff because of a decrease in funding and a reduced birth rate, the local authority had not asked schools to make changes as they wanted to demonstrate that classes of 30 or more were a regular occurrence and that children were at a disadvantage.

Carys Fowles explained that when schools set their budgets, consideration was given to the number of pupils that were due to start school, in years 5 and 6 and staffing, although it was not possible to predict the number of children moving into an area.

The Corporate Manager: Accountability and Progress added that admissions for September 2025 had closed, however, there were between 100-150 children who needed to apply. All schools except Aberaeron Primary had capacity at present. The difficulty with projected figures was that many things could change, and the service was only now confident with the data for September 2024.

10. Date of next meeting

Date of next meeting to be circulated in due course.