

Cllr Barbara Jones
Budget Speech 22/02/2018

Thank You Mayor.

Members, this is the fourth consecutive year that I have stood in this chamber to deliver my budget speech and each time I stand here I experience the same sense of pride and gratitude for all the hard work that has been done by so many people to help us reach this point.

I firmly believe that this council is one of the best local authorities in the country and we should be proud of every single member of our workforce. We should be proud of their collective effort to make Caerphilly council such a fantastic organisation which delivers so many essential services for people from all sections of our community.

This collective effort, which includes the dedication and commitment of all members in this chamber this evening, means that we are in a very strong position compared to many other local authorities who are struggling to deliver services and meet the needs of their communities in this very difficult financial climate.

Here in Caerphilly we have not seen the deep cuts and disruption to services that have been experienced in other parts of the country.

I'm not saying that we have escaped the impact of austerity, far from it, but what I am saying is that we are doing a very good job of protecting and maintaining our key services.

This is no accident. This is down to our robust financial management and the prudent approach that we have taken over recent years to ensure that the authority is braced for the major challenges that we face both now and in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff and members who have been instrumental in helping us deliver these budget proposals this evening – your efforts are very much appreciated.

Now, turning to the report, members will be aware that our provisional settlement for 2018/19 showed an increase of £1.973million in the funding we receive from the Welsh Government. However, after adjusting for the transfer in of specific grants and new responsibilities, this equated to a net cash reduction of £2.965million (or 1%) compared to the 2017/18 financial year on a like-for-like basis.

In light of this, the cabinet agreed a set of savings proposals totalling some £7.2million at its meeting on the 15th November last year. These proposals were then subject to a wide-ranging period of consultation lasting 7 weeks in total.

The final Local Government Financial Settlement was announced on the 20th December and showed a net cash reduction of £1.778m when compared with 2017/18 on a like-for-like basis. This was obviously slightly better than we were anticipating and allowed us to reconsider some of the proposed savings for 2018/19.

Feedback from the consultation process was an important element in determining the final 2018/19 budget proposals, in particular the decision to defer savings totalling £537k. I'm sure the community will welcome the fact that we have listened to their feedback and responded accordingly.

We have also listened to feedback regarding the future of Pontllanfraith Leisure Centre. Members will be aware that last week the Leader announced that we have deferred the implementation of the decision to close the site and we will now consider this matter as part of a wider leisure strategy review. This clearly demonstrates our commitment to being a listening

local authority and we are responding positively to the feedback from the community. In light of this announcement, I would like to add an additional recommendation that a further report be presented to Council outlining what deferred savings will need to be reinstated as a result of deferring the implementation of the decision to close Pontllanfraith leisure centre.

I would now like to draw members' attention to some of the key areas within the report such as:

An additional £3million has been added to the Social Services budget to help meet increasing demand, particularly within Children's Services where significant financial pressures are being experienced in the current financial year on placement budgets.

In terms of schools, the draft budget proposals presented to Cabinet in November assumed no growth for schools in 2018/19 – in other words a cash flat position. However, we have recommended that £547k should be transferred to assist schools with meeting anticipated additional costs arising from the teacher's pay award next year.

Turning now to Council Tax, the budget proposals within the report include a proposed increase of 4.52%. This will increase

our Band D precept from £1,011.96 to £1,057.70. This equates to an annual increase of £45.74 or weekly increase of 88p. None of us here want to see any increase in council tax, but unfortunately we are in a very difficult position where we have to choose between agreeing a reasonable increase in council tax or finding even more savings to add to the list.

Members, it is clear that we are going through a very difficult period and unfortunately it seems there are even tougher times ahead. Appendix 7 of the report highlights that we have a cumulative savings requirement of £40.822m for the five-year period from 2018/19 to 2022/23.

This is a huge figure and it is widely accepted that the council cannot continue as it is. There is a need to examine the way in which we use our resources to deliver the services required by our communities.

We will need to look at how services can become more efficient through examining how they are currently provided and exploring opportunities for greater customer focus, digital delivery, alternative delivery models and commercial opportunities.

We are all acutely aware that many difficult and unpopular decisions are yet to come, but we must rise to the challenge and do all we can to protect our services, protect our communities and meet the needs of our residents.

Finally it is worth noting that once again the opposition have failed to come up with any feasible alternative budget proposals that would deliver the scale of savings that are required, but unfortunately this is something that we have come to expect every year.

I would like to move the recommendations in this report and add the additional recommendation that a further report be presented to Council outlining what deferred savings will need to be reinstated as a result of deferring the implementation of the decision on the proposed closure of Pontllanfraith leisure centre. I conclude by once again thanking all the officers and members who have worked so hard over recent months to deliver this set of budget proposals.

Thank you

