

## **Annex 4b: Summary of comments from Viewpoint Panel meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2023**

**Attendees:** 5 young people (Youth Forum members), 10 Viewpoint Panel members (7 male 3 female)

### **Group 1**

**Use of reserves** – 2 strongly agreed, 2 agreed. 1 person disagreed because they felt that more money could be used from the reserves.

Cllr. Sean Rees responded to a number of questions regarding what reserves are ring-fenced for (capital projects, insurance for unforeseen disasters etc) and the impact of inflation on the “pot”.

Some concerns were raised that the project being funded by reserves are concentrated in Caerphilly. Regarding the new sports centre, the Leader explained that the current LC would cost £17m to improve, the new LC will cost us £13m alongside LUF contribution) and will be more energy efficient with lower running costs

**Proposed 7.9% increase in council tax** – 3 would support the proposed increase as they recognised that this provide income that would help us to continue to provide , 2 would support a lower increase in council tax

### **Proposals agreed with**

- Reduction in mileage budgets – staff travelling less working from home and meetings online so no need
- No revenue to capital programme – residents having to cover the cost of living so this isn't essential at the moment
- Not filling vacant posts – if the work is getting done without the staff, no need to replace (1 person disagreed with the housing benefits assessor post being removed)
- Realigning budgets – if budgets aren't being used, makes sense (1 person questioned and disagreed with the budget realignment re children with disabilities as they felt there is not enough support for children with disabilities)
- All looked positively on the proposals to cut corporate budgets

### **Proposals not supported**

- Community Empowerment Fund – charities need support – if this is removed, will something similar be available to charities to carry on doing the work they do? Charities who support residents and the work of the council
- Reduction in tourism budget – we need to bring more visitors into the borough
- Youth service budget – shouldn't be any impact on provision
- Book fund – one person disagreed
- Increase in sports pitch fees and charges for leisure services – impacts on residents directly when people are struggling financially
- Music fund – 1 disagreed, others agreed in light of money received from WG for new instruments
- Children with disabilities – disagree because there is more need for this service – disabled children aren't getting the support they need – there is more demand. Resident said that the support for ALN assessment is better than in other areas but there is no consistency, you see a different person every time which is not good for the disabled child
- Shared lives – this service isn't good and very expensive which could be why the demand is low
- Rail link subsidy – rethink an alternative route if this one is under used – there is a general lack of public transport – some other route may work better
- Questioned the reduction in equipment, computer and IT related expenditure (ELL3) – unsure how this wouldn't impact

### **Doing things differently**

- Questioned why and how much money was being spent on Penallta House. Comments made about making sure the building is fully used and isn't empty so the spend isn't wasted
- Asset rationalisation – with agile working and fully using Penallta House means that the council can sell off smaller buildings (less efficient/older etc)

- Questioned the need for the two new senior posts. These are on a very high salary, and there needs to be clear evidence of what these roles are achieving, what difference are they making to justify the high salaries. One person suggested senior managers should be paid based on performance.
- The group also questioned the need for the new team in HR on high salaries – again, what is the justification – what difference are they making? Is it helping?
- There should be better communication of what the council (and senior officers do) not council speak or “blowing their own trumpet”
- Invest in frontline staff (too many cuts to frontline, means council can’t deliver services effectively)
- Focus on key services – the essentials.

## **Group 2**

### **One off use of council reserves in 2023/24 totalling £15.051m. Do you agree or disagree with this approach at this time?**

The group unanimously strongly agreed that this approach was the correct one to take at this time.

### **Proposes council tax increase**

We are proposing a council tax increase of 7.9% for 2023/24. This would generate £4.880m of additional net income for the council.

Participants unanimously agreed that they do not support the proposed council tax increase of 7.9%. They would however support a lower increase in council tax of 5%. It was accepted that this would require an additional saving of £1.8m approx. to be found from elsewhere – this, the group felt should come from reserves.

### **Proposals the group particularly agreed with:**

- Budget realignments
- Vacancy management
- Asset rationalisation
- Community hubs

### **Proposals the group particularly disagreed with:**

- Markham Leisure Centre - £10,000 subsidy cut
- Highways maintenance budget temporary reduction (short-sighted as the opinion is that claims will increase for repairs to vehicles and that residents are in agreement to pay more council tax but expect a certain level of quality highways provision)
- Schools maintenance and energy costs
- Reducing grass cutting frequency in residential areas (due to impact on look and feel of the area) although agrees with the proposal on dual carriageways etc for biodiversity

### **Moving forward/doing things differently:**

- The importance of tackling the gap in economic prosperity between the north and the south of the borough
- Salami slicing budgets – is inefficient. The commercial world hasn't taken this approach for 20+ years
- While new capital investments are great, we need to ensure we are effectively running what we already have... e.g. the announcement of the new Caerphilly Leisure Centre is great but the council cannot afford £10,000 to reduce the subsidy at Markham Leisure Centre. Where is the sense in that?
- This council is a business. Treat it like one! Layer upon layer of bureaucracy and red tape that needs reducing
- Income generation is a good idea and should be explored more

### **Group 3 (Youth Forum)**

#### **Use of Council Reserves**

Strongly agree/agree - an important use of savings when this is the biggest budget cut yet. I think it is best we use the savings to minimise the damages and hope for a smaller reduction in future. As people are struggling with the cost of living this is now the best time to use it – people struggle to pay bills already without additional increases - gas and electric cannot be paid and will lead to poverty so people need support from reserves

Disagree - because the more we take out the savings we will get used to it and carry on doing it

#### **Council Tax Increase**

- Support a lower tax increase: Money is hard to come by so to get small increments is needed. More brackets put in place to decide how much the tax should be increased
- Would pay more - if there is to be an increase in the council tax it would have to be used for the *needs* of the county not wants
- Do not support any increase - people are already struggling and therefore I do not support any increase in council tax. When so many are already struggling with current prices and price increases it will literally be impossible for a lot of people to pay it

#### **Savings proposals agreed with**

- Additional Tennis Fees - agree but if it is increased it should be a small amount across all sport services. Not many people play tennis and most other sports cost money. There isn't enough people playing it pay for it therefore it should be charged. I pay for sporting services, why dot tennis facilities be paid for too? Small fees to partake in a hobby isn't much of an inconvenience for those who truly enjoy it
- Grass Cutting reduction - biodiversity improves our tourism. With the amount of pollution on the roadsides I think it would be beneficial to only cut the edge of the grass. Let wildlife flourish but maintain walkways and cycle paths. It is not necessary on non-overgrown areas.
- Free School Meals - As long as anyone who wants/needs FSM and instead of applying aren't being turned away, redistribution be the best option. Parents are wasting councils money by not claiming the FSM (1 person was unsure what to think)

#### **Proposals disagreed with**

- Youth Service Cuts - as a young person I feel that £125,000 is a lot of money to cut from something that has been so crucial in helping and creating young peoples future. Youth services provide opportunities for young people of all backgrounds. Cuts will cut youth work in the borough which can lead to less help to improve the area. Youth services need more staff, apprenticeships in the youth service may provide more opportunities for job positions to be applied for
- Grass cutting reduction - Increases pollen levels to a higher risk of hay fever leading to NHS cost

#### **Moving forward**

- Bring tourism to Caerphilly with more events, more events in Caerphilly Caste to make money
- Business opportunities such as bike hire
- Turn lights off in council buildings at night

#### **Additional Considerations**

- More money in bin service for emptying rubbish bins not being emptied in town centre in Caerphilly
- Better Transport to hospitals
- Better bus service
- Switch street lighting on all night
- Do not cut bin collections
- More education around waste management and recycling