

Cllr Barbara Jones
Budget Speech 21/02/2019

Thank you Mayor

Members, the first thing I would like to do before I go into any detail about the budget is to sincerely thank all those who have worked so hard to deliver the comprehensive piece of work that has resulted in the report before you.

So many officers across every directorate have contributed to the budget process. Staff and councillors at all levels have done their bit to find efficiencies and savings, which have allowed us to present this balanced budget this evening.

I am extremely proud and appreciative of their efforts and I am extremely proud that, once again, this authority has been able to set a balanced budget – despite the significant financial pressures that we continue to face.

I, along with my Cabinet colleagues, have endured sleepless nights during the budget-setting process as we all want to protect services and protect the most vulnerable people in the community.

We were very uncomfortable about the level of cuts that we, as a Cabinet, were required to make and it was a

difficult decision for us to put these forward for public consultation.

Fortunately we received additional funding from Welsh Government which allowed us to remove a number of these cuts from the list for now. We have listened to the feedback from our residents and responded accordingly.

We have clearly demonstrated that this council is prepared to listen and respond in a positive manner to the views of the local community and I'm sure our revised proposals will be welcomed by all those who took the time to have their say during our widespread consultation exercise.

It's bizarre that I'm actually standing here this evening seemingly pleased that we ONLY need to make £14million of cuts instead of 15million. This truly is a sad reflection of the current situation that we are in - A situation which can be squarely attributed to the ongoing austerity measures imposed on us by the UK Government in Westminster.

These really are very difficult times, but we continue to do our best to meet the needs and aspirations of our communities, despite the huge financial pressures facing this council. We are obliged to deliver a balanced budget and discharge our financial duties as a prudent and financially responsible local authority.

It's very much been a balancing act to arrive at this point this evening, but as I've already said, I'm very proud to be part of this excellent organisation and I'm sure our residents also share this view.

Now, turning to the report, members will be aware that Cabinet approved a list of proposed savings at the end of last year totalling £14.6 million and these were then subject to a significant period of consultation.

The final settlement for 2019/20 was slightly better than expected, therefore we had some flexibility to reconsider some of the savings on the list and respond to the feedback received from our residents.

I'm sure members will welcome the news that we have reconsidered a number of key savings proposals including Community Safety Wardens, the 'Meals on Wheels' service, the closure of 2 household recycling centres, rat treatment charges, Community Centre cuts and funding for community schemes such as Bargoed Ice Rink and Senghenydd Splash Pad.

We have also reluctantly proposed a 6.95% council tax increase for 2019/20 which none of us here this evening want to see implemented, but the sad truth is that we are faced with the dilemma of either increasing council tax or make deeper cuts to frontline services.

Interestingly the feedback from the recent budget consultation revealed that whilst an increase is unpopular, there seems to be an acceptance and understanding that we need to make these difficult decisions in order to protect services.

On a brighter note, I'm sure members will welcome the allocation of £5million towards 21st Century Schools match funding, £1.2 million for a number of exciting regeneration proposals to boost prosperity across the county borough as well as an ambitious £14.5million capital programme for 2019/20 which will deliver a range of benefits to communities across the county borough.

Looking ahead, it is clear that we are still not out of the woods and there are still challenges to face. The revised MTFP assumptions require savings of £44million from 2020/21 to 2023/24, with £15.7million required for 2020/21 alone.

Unfortunately there are many difficult and unpopular decisions yet to come, but we must - and will - rise to the challenge. We will continue to do all we can to protect our frontline services, protect our communities and meet the needs of our residents.

I would like to move the recommendations and conclude by once again thanking all those who have worked so

hard over recent months to deliver this set of sound budget proposals.

Thank you