

25 October 2018

Suzy Davies AM
Caroline Jones AM
Dai Lloyd AM
Jeremy Miles AM
David Rees AM
Bethan Sayed AM
(ALL BY EMAIL)

Dear Assembly Members,

A detailed report will shortly be published on the Council's website containing proposals for budget cuts which will be considered by the Council's Cabinet next week (31 October). The decision we are being invited to make is to put these proposals out for public consultation. The report will be accessible here: <https://democracy.npt.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?Committeed=158>

I am writing to give you advance warning of some of the lowlights (as opposed to highlights). These include the following:

- The Council has provided more or less an inflation proof increase to our schools delegated budgets for this current year. As things stand, we will be unable to repeat that for 2019/20 which will have an impact upon staffing levels in schools, possibly exacerbated by the sharp increase in employer contributions for teacher's pensions. This threatens the financial viability of several schools already in deficit positions, particularly as the Welsh Government is also diverting significant remaining resources away from the front line in schools;
- The Council will continue to meet assessed need; but a change in policy is proposed to no longer provide the full range of support to older people where the package of support exceeds the current cost of a residential placement, where it is safe to do so;
- It is proposed to cease providing free taxi transport for certain categories of adult service users, where transport is not an assessed need;

- An increase of £141 in burial charges to move closer to full cost recovery;
- Other fees and charges increasing to meet the costs of the service including a tripling of pest control charges and others;
- With the declining usage of libraries and particularly low patronage in some areas, the whole service is to undergo a review. In the short to medium term, the closure or transfer of four libraries is being considered (Baglan, Cwmavon, Glynneath and Skewen);
- Reductions in the youth service with proposals to close or reduce the operating hours of facilities;
- The medium term future of such facilities as Pontardawe Arts Centre and the Cefn Coed Museum are now very dependent upon bids for capital funding submitted to the Arts Council and the Welsh Government (Valleys Programme) respectively. Meanwhile, the Council's subsidy is proposed to be reduced further;
- It is proposed to cease maintenance services in relation to bowling greens and ensure full cost recovery for similar work on the sports fields; and
- All across Council service areas, there is a direct impact on jobs. Compulsory redundancies remain an option of last resort; but increasingly they seem to be unavoidable in some areas. Jobs are already in serious jeopardy in the Minority Ethnic Support Services as a consequence of the cut to the Welsh Government grant earlier this year. The regionalisation of these services has proved to be a mirage after some six months of circular debate.

These proposals and others are a direct result of the complete imbalance (between the NHS and other public services) in the Welsh Government's draft budget and provisional local government settlement published earlier this month. A point made repeatedly by the Welsh Local Government Association, Trade Unions, the Future Generations Commissioner and others. Despite claims to the contrary, as things stand there is no extra money going directly to local government for key services such as social care and schools.

What is perhaps of most immediate and serious concern to me is the ability of this Council (and others no doubt) to assist on Delayed Transfer of Care and related matters during this coming winter. To a significant extent, planning seems to be predicated on additional community care capacity which is unfunded. My officers are still receiving bulletins, invitations to seminars and other missives from the Welsh Government which are totally unconnected to the reality of the budget proposals. But in the final analysis, we can only do what we can do with the resources we have got.

As far as I am concerned, the responsibility for explaining the overall position – and the accountability for the consequences – rests firmly with those AMs who either support this budget or who have not actively proposed alternatives to dramatically tackle the situation. If the position is not addressed to a significant extent in the final budget/settlement, then any subsequent representations to the Council made by the same AMs when these cuts begin to bite would, in my opinion, be both empty and hypocritical.

There is still time to correct this position prior to the final Welsh Government budget and final local government settlement and the possibility of at least some extra resources accruing from the Chancellor's budget/autumn statement next week, where Welsh Ministers have said that local government is first in the queue.

I am sending copies of this letter to our Members of Parliament; the Cabinet Secretaries for Finance, Local Government & Public Services and Health and Social Care; the Leader of the WLGA, the Future Generations Commissioner, the Chair of ABMU Local Health Board and the Chair of the Joint Trade Unions at the Council.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Rob Jones
Leader of the Council