

Annex 6k: Response Hefin David

12th January 2020

Dear Philippa, Dear Christina,

I am writing to make my contribution to Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC)'s Draft Budget Consultation 2020-21, as part of the 'Caerphilly Conversation'.

I am aware that the report approved by CCBC's Cabinet on 13th November recommended savings of approximately £8.5 million for the 2020-21 financial year. I would hope that the Provisional Local Government Settlement 2020-21 that was published by the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James AM, on Monday 16th December, has helped to ease the financial pressures on the local authority even if only slightly.

The information provided to Assembly Members indicated that Caerphilly County Borough will receive a 4.1% increase in its annual budgetary settlement from Welsh Government compared to last year. I appreciate that this will only be of limited assistance following years of austerity-induced fiscal retrenchment, but it is nonetheless a more generous settlement than recent years.

I sincerely hope that this the start of greater investment in front-line public services by Welsh Government; however this can only happen in earnest once the UK Government has ended its politically-motivated policy of austerity. I know that my colleague Wayne David MP will be holding the newly-elected UK Government to account on this matter and making sure that they deliver on their spending pledges made in the recent General Election campaign.

In terms of the actual draft budget itself, I would make the following comments on specific items:

B08 Community & Leisure Services - Closure of Trehir Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC). I would oppose the closure of this facility as it would negatively impact on residents in the lower third of my constituency (particularly those living in the wards of Bedwas, Trethomas and Machen; and St James) and risk an increase in illegal fly-tipping and littering.

C11 – Infrastructure – Blackwood to Ystrad Link – Withdrawal of subsidy. This cut is directly contrary to the principles of the South Wales Metro and funding should be found to enhance rather than reduce rail linked cross valley services. It is also contrary to the climate emergency declaration as it will encourage greater use of cars. To what extent would cutting this service undermine the Metro plans?

C12 Infrastructure - Reduction in Carriageway maintenance budget. Is the local authority satisfied that one-off grants from Welsh Government and internal capital resources will be sufficient to support the programme of works on highways?

C22 - Community Centres - Withdrawal of funding for 2 Centres not in CCBC ownership (Rudry and Glan-y-Nant). This would risk the closure of these two centres, with Glan Y Nant most at risk. There was an historic informal agreement between Caerphilly's predecessor authority that Glan y Nant would retain the funding for as long as it was open. This agreement has been referred to on the occasions that I have met with the committee.

C24 Waste Management - Reduction in Cleansing staff numbers (6 posts). Cleansing staff numbers have been reduced in successive years. Can the Refuse & Cleaning service continue to sustain such reductions?

C28 Corporate Policy - Reduction in Voluntary Sector budget. The voluntary sector is increasingly being called upon to help deliver front-line community services in the light of successive years of fiscal austerity. I would be particularly concerned with any proposed cuts to Citizens Advice services, something which is urgently needed during a time of UK Government-induced welfare reform. Is such a proposed reduction self-defeating?

C29 Corporate Policy - Delete remaining Technical Assistance budget. This proposal will impact on volunteers who are being asked to do more in return for no remuneration. This could deter further volunteer involvement in community projects and send the wrong message to community groups in terms of how we as a society value their contribution to everyday life.

C30 Corporate Policy - Further reduction in the Well-being budget. Likewise, this could reduce the number of community projects being undertaken by local volunteer groups.

D12 Meals Direct - Increase price of meals by 25p from April 2020. I feel there is an unjustifiable discrepancy between the proposed 7.57% increase for Meals on Wheels and the proposed 3% increase for prices of meals in the staff canteen at Tŷ Penallta. If staff meal prices were increased by 4.5%, for example, then it would allow for a lower reduction in the price of Meals on Wheels. This would help to safeguard older and more vulnerable residents of the County Borough.

Proposed Council Tax increase: I believe the proposed increase of 6.95%, while still meaning Caerphilly County Borough residents would pay among the lowest council tax in Wales, is too high an increase during a time of intense pressures on household budgets in low-income areas. I would urge the local authority to consider a lower increase so as to reduce the impact on the County Borough's more vulnerable residents.

I would also add that I would oppose any further reduction to local authority litter management services, as constituents have contacted me about the increased amount of litter being found on grass verges and on kerbsides in our communities. Nor would I wish to see any further reduction in the frequency of household waste collections, as this could also contribute to a rise in illegal fly-tipping and have a negative impact on the quality of the local environmental.

Last year I raised my concern that the council would no longer part fund the Aber Valley splash pad. This is a very small amount of money, the removal of which would have a disproportionate impact on the community and I urge you to continue to provide it.

While I appreciate that my contribution today will add to public pressure to reverse proposed spending reductions, I am duty-bound as an Assembly Member to make representations to the Council on behalf of residents when they believe that they are being adversely affected by Council decisions and/or service changes.

However, please be aware that I always do this in the spirit of cooperation and transparency, and my door is always open to discuss the big issues facing local government in Caerphilly, whether that is in Tŷ Penallta or here at the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff Bay.

Yours sincerely

Hefin David AM

Hefin David

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