

Annex 5k: Hefin David Response

From: "David, Hefin (Aelod Cynulliad | Assembly Member)"

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Subject: RE: Draft Budget proposals

Date: 10 January 2019 11:27

Dear Dave, Dear Christina,

Thank you for your e-mail of 29th November and for affording me the chance to contribute to Caerphilly County Borough Council's 2019/20 budget consultation as part of the Caerphilly Conversation. As one of the County Borough's elected AMs, I appreciate the importance of a regular dialogue with the local authority, especially on important matters that relate to the provision of frontline public services.

I sympathise entirely with the incredibly difficult choices that councillors have had to make this year as part of the budget process. As an elected councillor myself between 2007 and 2017, I am familiar with the dilemmas that my former colleagues face when faced with acute budgetary pressures. As an Assembly Member since 2016, I have also seen at first-hand how the Welsh Government has had to reluctantly accept that it has less and less to pass on to local government, due to continuing cuts to the Welsh Block Grant made by the UK Government. Despite the Prime Minister's recent words to the contrary, austerity has not ended and it has been Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities who have borne the brunt of cuts that are, ultimately, a political choice.

While I recognise that demand levels on frontline services continue to grow due to both an ageing population and UK Government-induced welfare reforms, you will be aware that adjustments made to the Local Government Settlement since the start of the Caerphilly Conversation mean that Caerphilly County Borough Council will now not face a real-terms cut to its budget in 2019/20 as compared to 2018/19. The newly-appointed Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James AM, confirmed this in a written statement to AMs on Thursday 20th December. While Caerphilly had been facing a real-terms cut of 0.3 per cent, the change will now amount to 0.0 per cent. I appreciate that this is relatively little comfort to councillors who are having to make extremely difficult decisions in order to balance the budget, but it does put Caerphilly in a better position than nine other Welsh local authorities who are facing real-terms cuts despite the changes made ahead of the Final Local Government Settlement. You will note, also, that the President of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Jo Miller, recently acknowledged in the edition of the Local Government Chronicle published on 22nd November that *'the total revenue support grant for the 22 Welsh local authorities next year will be more than the amount the 400-odd English councils will receive'* (£3.2 billion in Wales; as opposed to £2.2 billion in England). Accounting for the fact that Welsh local authorities have to fund schools out of their budgets, in terms of local government *'per capita spending in England is £1,423, in Scotland about £2,230 and in Wales just over £2,300'*. These figures reflect the situation before the adjustments made ahead of the final Local Government Settlement on Thursday 20th December.

As you know, my door is always open in order to discuss the big issues facing local government in Caerphilly; I value our quarterly update meetings as well as our recent one-off meeting in Cardiff Bay to specifically discuss Welsh Government's draft budget. As an elected AM, I am duty-bound to make representations to the Council on behalf of my constituents 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, fully aware of the dramatic

budgetary pressures facing local authorities in Wales today. Ultimately, Welsh Government can only begin to substantively improve its financial support to local government in Wales once the UK Government ends its decade-long policy of fiscal austerity in more than just name. I'm sure we will all agree that that is something that cannot happen soon enough.

With regard to the budget specifics listed in the document attached in your e-mail below, I would raise the following observations and questions. I would also ask the Council to also consider mitigating the cuts in the ways indicated:

Communities

- **Page 2 – Review of Staffing Model in Libraries:** Would there be any impact on the opening times for library services?
- **Page 4 – Public Transport** (review of contracts with highest subsidy per passenger; £68,000 saving): which bus routes will be reduced/terminated? I would have particular concerns about the future of the C18 route (Bargoed to Bargoed via Gilfach Estate) in my constituency.
- **Page 4 – Provision of Meals Direct Service to Section 117 clients only** (£141,000 saving): what alternative provision will be put in place for constituents who will have their meals-on-wheels service ceased? How has the council assessed any health impacts?
- **Page 4/5 – Cessation of the Community Safety Warden Service** (£355,000 saving): I **support** the removal of this service, as it is one that could and should be provided by Gwent Police if it is to continue and there should be opportunity for redeployment of current staff either within the council when taking responsibility for parking management, or to Gwent Police.
- **Page 5 – Community Centres** (withdrawal of funding for two centres not in Council ownership; reduction of 1-hour caretaker support across all centres; reduction of all caretaker support across all centres from October; respective savings of £13,000, £18,000 and £79,000) – I **strongly oppose** all three of these proposals. The consequence would be the closure of centres that are otherwise well-used. I know from experience that Glan-y-nant Community Centre would struggle to remain open. Tir-y-berth Community Centre, for which I and the management committee acquired c. £400,000 of Big Lottery Fund money to rebuild, would also struggle. This centre was rebuilt, saving the Council demolition costs and providing the area with a brand new facility at no cost to the Council.
- **Page 6 – Waste Management** (closure of civic amenity sites; £98,000 saving): I **oppose** the closure of the Penallta site as this is central to the County Borough; however I **do not oppose** the closure of the Aberbargoed site.

Miscellaneous Finance

- **Page 9 – Communities Match Funding** (£15,000 saving): I **strongly urge** that this is **continued** as its withdrawal will impact on two facilities very popular with my constituents (Bargoed Ice Rink and Senghenydd Splash Pad).

Yours sincerely,

Hefin David AM