



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

28TH JANUARY 2021

THE COUNCIL'S 2021/22 REVENUE BUDGET

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND DIGITAL SERVICES

AUTHOR: Barrie Davies (01443 424026)

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides Cabinet with information in respect of the 2021/22 local government settlement and the outcomes of the budget consultation phase 1 exercise, to assist with its deliberations in formulating the revenue budget strategy for the financial year 2021/22, which it will recommend to Council, for approval.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- 2.1 Note that the procedures relating to revenue budget construction, the budget consultation process, and reporting to Council, are set out in the "Budget and Policy Framework" within the Council's Constitution.
- 2.2 To note and consider the outcomes of the budget consultation phase 1 process.
- 2.3 Consider and if appropriate agree the draft 2021/22 Revenue Budget Strategy, detailed in the attached Discussion Paper 'Appendix A', as the basis upon which a second phase of consultation will take place.
- 2.4 Agree the draft timetable for setting the 2021/22 revenue budget as set out at Appendix A2.



- 2.5 Agree to receive feedback from the second phase of budget consultation in order to consider and determine the final budget strategy for submission to Council.
- 2.6 Agree that the Council continues to support the medium term financial strategy aimed at maximising ongoing efficiency in service delivery, targeted service transformation and other changes that maintain the financial integrity of the Council whilst still aiming as much as possible to protect jobs and key services.

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The revenue budget for the financial year ending the 31st March 2022, must be constructed in accordance with the “Budget and Policy Framework” (contained in the Council’s Constitution), which was agreed by Members in May 2002.
- 3.2 Under these arrangements, it is for the Council’s “respective Chief Officers” to report to Cabinet, and for the Cabinet to then recommend a budget to Council, after having conducted an appropriate budget consultation exercise. I have reproduced the relevant sections of the Constitution at Appendix A1, for Members’ information.
- 3.3 A draft timetable for agreeing the 2021/22 revenue budget strategy is attached at Appendix A2.

4.0 THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A BALANCED BUDGET STRATEGY FOR 2021/22

- 4.1 The Council's Senior Leadership Team have considered budget strategy options throughout the Autumn and in light of emerging delays to the WG Local Government Settlement timescales as a consequence of delays to the planned spending review, alongside the significant and unprecedented impact which the pandemic has had across all our services.
- 4.2 I have reported on the implications of the provisional settlement and on our updated budget requirement to Council on the 20th January 2021 and set this out in detail in the discussion paper attached at Appendix A.
- 4.3 Based on the provisional settlement and alongside our updated base budget requirements reflecting the continuing increased pressures across many of our services, I have also set out a high level robust and



balanced budget strategy option which would include a Council Tax increase of 2.65%.

- 4.4 The outcome from the Phase 1 budget consultation process is also now available for Cabinet to consider alongside the proposals.
- 4.5 Clearly, there are many possible budget permutations open to the Council, but Members' overriding ambition will be to construct a balanced budget package, that is equitable and fair to all by limiting any impact on our much valued service provision and where possible, provides for targeting resources to key service areas, whilst, at the same time, avoiding an excessive increase in the Council Tax levied by the County Borough Council.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The Senior Leadership Team holds the collective view that the Council should commit itself to setting its 2021/22 revenue spending and, as a consequence, the Council Tax levied next year, at a level which balances the desire for fair and equitable service provision, with the need to recognise the impact that excessive tax burdens can have on local households.
- 5.2 A translation of the Senior Leadership Team's recommended strategic approach into a high level budget for 2021/22 with a Council Tax increase of 2.65% is attached to this report.
- 5.3 Given that the financial resources currently available to the Council are finite and that future local government settlements continue to be uncertain, the Senior Leadership Team believes that an ongoing, robust medium-term financial strategy is essential to ensure that our core public services continue to be improved.

APPENDIX A

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

28th JANUARY 2021

A DISCUSSION PAPER PREPARED BY THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM IN RESPONSE TO THE 2021/22 LOCAL GOVERNMENT SETTLEMENT

AUTHOR: BARRIE DAVIES, DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND DIGITAL SERVICES
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1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Constitution sets out the procedure, which must be adhered to when setting the Council's annual revenue budget. It is a specific requirement of the Constitution that the Council's Chief Officers first report to the Cabinet, to advise Members on the issues involved (see extract of the Constitution at Appendix 1). Following due consideration of that report, and after having conducted an appropriate budget consultation exercise, it will then be for the Cabinet to determine a strategy and recommend a budget to Council, for final approval. A timetable for this process is attached at Appendix 2.
- 1.2 Prior to determining its preferred budget strategy for the financial year ending the 31st March 2022, the Cabinet must consider:
- The Council's own financial position.
 - The financial and service implications of the Welsh Government's (WG) 2021/22 local government settlement.
 - Our Cwm Taf – Cwm Taf Wellbeing Plan 2018 -2023.
 - The Council's Corporate Plan 2020 - 2024.
 - The level of demand and the statutory basis for delivery of services.
 - The results of the General Budget Strategy consultation exercise.
 - The critical role of the Council in responding to the pandemic and supporting and protecting our residents, businesses and communities.
- 1.3 If Members are to arrive at the best possible outcome for our residents, it will be important that an appropriate weighting is given to each of the key determinants in paragraph 1.2 above, so that relative resourcing and spending priorities can be properly determined.
- 1.4 Accurate and up-to-date information is readily available in respect of the Council's own financial position, and officers have now analysed the 2021/22 local government settlement from Rhondda Cynon Taf's perspective.

2.0 THE COUNCIL'S FINANCIAL POSITION

- 2.1 Members have continued to receive regular updates on the financial position and projections for this Council during 2020/21. A key starting point and important consideration is the annual statement of accounts. At the Council meeting on the 25th November 2020, I presented the Council's audited accounts, which reported General Fund Balances amounting to £8.709M.

- 2.2 Given the continuing financial pressures the Council is working under, it remains my view, that the Council should hold a minimum of £10M as General Fund Balances, (i.e. its working balance). This level is set given the context of the need for continued strong financial management that is felt to be essential to ensure that the Council maintains financial flexibility and stability going forward.
- 2.3 During the last financial year, 2019/20 our reserves were used to support our residents and businesses in the immediate aftermath of Storm Dennis. Whilst reducing our reserves below what I consider to be the minimum level, it was wholly appropriate that they were used in this way and for this purpose. I am satisfied that plans are in place to replenish General Fund Reserves to the minimum level over the period of our Medium Term Financial Plan (at £0.5M per year for the next 3 years).
- 2.4 Members will be aware that in addition to General Fund Reserves, the Council also holds a number of earmarked reserves that are kept under continuous review and are assessed each year by Audit Wales. Members will be aware that included in these Reserves is a Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve that has successfully supported transitional funding as part of the Council's Medium Term Service Planning arrangements. It has achieved this through helping to smooth the delivery of budget savings over a number of years, whilst still allowing an annual balanced budget to be delivered. The starting point for the Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve as at the 31st March 2020 is £3.563M. As part of our ongoing strategy, we have continued to identify and deliver savings in-year which means we have been able to increase the level of transitional funding available and the latest position is that this reserve has now increased to £4.330M (additional in year savings to date of £0.767M).
- 2.4 Audit Wales continue to emphasise that we must remain disciplined, if we are to maintain our long-term goal of driving forward continuous improvement of key services, though this becomes increasingly harder to achieve following a period of such severe financial pressures.
- 2.5 I believe the Audit Wales assessment is an accurate one and it is clear that Members continue to take their fiduciary duty extremely seriously as evidenced by the positive reports received from the regulators and the track record of budgetary control across services. The challenge, therefore, is to construct a prudent, equitable and fair revenue budget for the financial year ending the 31st March 2022. This must involve an approach which publicly demonstrates sound financial stewardship; which does not take unnecessary risks; which maximises income generation; continues to deliver (as far as possible, and where available) year on year efficiency savings and which delivers the services that are needed and we can afford, as well as protecting as many jobs as possible.

3.0 THE 2021/22 LOCAL GOVERNMENT SETTLEMENT

- 3.1 The timing of the Local Government Settlement for 2021/22 has been extremely uncertain throughout the Autumn period as a consequence of the timing of the UK Government Spending Review and the period it would cover, originally planned for 3 years but revised to one year.

3.2 On the 22nd December 2020, the Minister for Housing and Local Government (Julie James MS) announced the Provisional 2021/22 Local Government Settlement. The Minister's statement and key data table is attached at Appendix 3.

3.3 The "headlines" of the 2021/22 Provisional Settlement are as follows:-

- a. The overall increase in Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) funding for 2021/22 (of unhypothecated funding) at an all Wales level, after adjusting for transfers is 3.8% (+£172M).
- b. The settlement for Rhondda Cynon Taf, amounts to an increase of **3.8%** which equates to the average all Wales increase. Settlement figures across Wales range from 2.0% to 5.6%.
- c. No 'floor' protection has been included for 2021/22.
- d. The Settlement figures for 2021/22 include transfers into the settlement in respect of the Teachers Pay Grant (£3.981M) and the Coastal Risk Management Programme (not applicable to this Council). The value of the Teachers Pay Grant for this Council is £0.328M. Whilst the part year (2020/21) implications of the Teachers Pay Grant transfer into the settlement, the additional full year implications are to be funded from within the settlement increase.
- e. There is no indication of settlement levels beyond 2021/22.
- f. Provisional figures and indicative estimates are included for specific grants, at an all Wales level. Of particular note, would be the continuation and increase (from £40M to £50M) in the Social Care Workforce Grant. This funds our core base budget.
- g. The Council's General Capital Funding allocation has increased by £0.087M to £13.764M.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2021/22 PROVISIONAL SETTLEMENT

4.1 The provisional settlement indicates that our 2021/22 RSG and NDR funding will total £404.375M.

4.2 In anticipation of the 2021/22 local government settlement, the Council's service managers have constructed base budget requirements for next financial year. Those initial calculations provided for:-

- Estimated employee costs, pension costs and National Insurance Contribution levels;
- Non-pay (i.e. goods and services) inflation, including energy and fuel;
- Corporate financing requirements and levies; and
- Full year effects of any additional burdens imposed on the Council.

4.3 The Provisional Settlement is within the range modelled in the most recent Medium Term Financial Plan and recognises some of the intense funding pressures which are being experienced across local government in general but also within Rhondda Cynon Taf. **It also importantly recognises the critical**

role which local government continues to play in responding to the pandemic and protecting our communities and residents.

- 4.4 Members have continued to receive updates on the projections of the Council's revenue budget position for the period to 2023/24, as part of our Medium Term Service Planning arrangements. The latest of these assessments was considered by Council on the 21st October 2020 where, based on a range of modelled settlement levels, projected a funding gap of £9.9M (at +4% settlement), £13.8M (at +3% settlement) and £17.7M (at +2% settlement).
- 4.5 As referenced at section 3, the provisional settlement provides this Council with an uplift of 3.8%. There is also an increase in the Social Care Workforce Grant, which funds our core base budget.
- 4.6 Cabinet on the 17th November 2020 determined the Council Tax Base for 2021/22 at £77,197.81. The impact on the modelled budget gap of our updated tax base can also now be reflected.
- 4.7 The combined effects of the above updates is shown in table 1 below.

Table 1 : Revised Budget Gap at Provisional Settlement

	£'000
MTFP Budget Gap at 3%	13,809
Additional Resources at Provisional Settlement (including impact of updated Tax Base)	- 4,049
Additional Social Care Workforce Grant	- 675
Revised Budget Gap	9,085

- 4.8 Our base budget requirements for 2021/22 have continued to be reviewed since the preparation of the MTFP and a number of updates can now be made.
- 4.9 The UK Government Spending Review in November included a proposed pause of national public sector pay, an effective pay freeze for public sector staff with the exception of a pay increase of £250 per year for salary points below £24,000. Consequently, Welsh Government did not receive any further funding in this respect from UK Government. It is anticipated that the appropriate pay negotiating bodies and arrangements will comply with this, including with regard to teachers pay which is a devolved matter for Wales.
- 4.10 Our waste management costs have increased as a consequence of the impact the pandemic has had on residents and businesses. The overall quantum of waste has moved toward more kerbside residential collection, away from trade waste with a changed composition and an increase in the volume of residual waste.
- 4.11 Other base update requirements have also been made in respect of :
- Drainage Team
 - Children's Services - Additional Cost Pressures
 - Adult Social Care Costs
 - Additional Learning Needs
 - Other (including fleet / vehicle costs and community resilience)

4.12 These updates are summarised in table 2 below.

Table 2 : Base Budget Updates

	£'000
Public Sector Pay	- 7,861
Additional Waste Management and Disposal Costs	1,000
Drainage Team	500
Children's Services - Additional Cost Pressures	1,302
Adult Social Care Costs	1,048
Additional Learning Needs	500
Other	360
Total Base Updates	- 3,151

4.13 In the MTFP, a number of risk items were identified and estimated in financial terms. In light of the above updates it is now appropriate that these risks are removed from our base budget requirement for next year, albeit they will continue to be monitored as we go forward and continue to refresh our MTFP.

Table 3 : Risk Value to Remove

	£'000
Removal of Risk Items	- 1,877

4.14 The combined effects of the above updates on the budget gap are now shown in table 4.

Table 4 : Revised Budget Gap 2021/22

	£'000
Budget Gap at Provisional Settlement	9,085
Updated Base Budget Requirements	- 3,151
Removal of Budget Risks	- 1,877
Remaining Budget Gap	4,057

4.15 This reflects the position which was reported to Council on the 20th January 2021 and it is against this backdrop that we must consider our budget strategy for 2021/22.

5.0 DEVELOPING AN EQUITABLE, DELIVERABLE AND BALANCED BUDGET FOR 2021/22

5.1 Notwithstanding the relatively positive settlement from WG for 2021/22, it does follow a sustained period of real term reductions to our funding levels and more recently significant storm damage and the pandemic, and it is against this context that we need to develop a balanced budget for next year. There remain significant pressures upon many of our services together with a limited ability to increase Council Tax income, and a low tax base. Within these parameters, we will therefore need to take appropriate decisions to ensure that next year's

budget is equitable for all, does not compromise our financial stability and protects and develops our key services.

- 5.2 I touched upon the Council's overall financial position in Section 2 of the report. In my view, it is vital that we continue with the strategy we have adopted to date that takes account of the importance of sound financial management, including the level of General Fund balances and appropriate use of the "Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve" as transitional funding, whilst targeting any available resources toward our high priority, customer-focused public services.
- 5.3 Every year, there are certain corporate financial provisions that must be "top sliced" locally, before service budgets can be allocated. Next year will be no different. There will be a requirement for:
- a) A provision to meet levies from External Bodies;
 - b) A provision for Capital Charges;
 - c) A provision for all other "Miscellaneous Finance" items (Audit Fees, Insurance Costs, Bank Charges, etc.) which are non-specific to any particular Service Group; and
 - d) Resources to fund the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- 5.4 As part of our updated budget requirement, appropriate sums have been set aside for these corporate financial requirements.
- 5.5 Additional costs and income losses which we have incurred during this financial year specifically and directly attributable to the pandemic have been funded by Welsh Government, via a claims based Hardship Fund. WG are committed to continuing this process into 2021/22 and accordingly our core base budget does not include provision for such additional costs.

6.0 COUNCIL TAX LEVELS

- 6.1 This Council has always acted reasonably when setting its Council Tax, balancing the impact upon services and the ability of the public to pay, recognising that those eligible will receive support through the Welsh Government's Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS). The original modelled proposal was to increase Council Tax in 2021/22 by 2.85%. This was consistent with the level of increase for last year 2020/21. It is now proposed that Council Tax be increased by **2.65%** for next year. This will increase the remaining budget gap by £0.182M.
- 6.2 Members will be aware that the costs of the CTRS impacts on the net income generated through any increase in Council Tax. A 1% increase in Council Tax will generate an additional income for the Council of £1.157M (at the 2021/22 tax base level), but will also cost £0.247M in additional CTRS requirements. It therefore follows that a 1% increase generates a net additional income of £0.910M, or stated another way, 21% of any Council Tax increase is lost to support the increased costs associated with the Welsh Government's CTRS.

7.0 SCHOOLS BUDGET (ISB)

- 7.1 Members have always viewed our schools as being a key priority and have ensured that they have been treated favourably in comparison with other council services.
- 7.2 The Schools Budget (ISB) is proposed to be increased to cover, in full, all inflationary and pupil number pressures, including NDR increased costs. Unlike other Council services there is no efficiency target or expectation albeit schools may need to take local action to absorb the financial implications of decisions taken locally.
- 7.3 In overall terms, the proposal sees the Schools Budget increase by £2.2M, from £161.6M to £163.8M. Schools are therefore fully funded for 2021/22.

8.0 EFFICIENCY

- 8.1 Council services have for many years now delivered against ambitious efficiency targets, making considerable budget reductions without adversely impacting on front line service provision.
- 8.2 As part of the current year's budget strategy, efficiencies of £6M were identified and delivered albeit it was noted that the ongoing sustainability of delivering efficiencies at this level would need to be considered.
- 8.3 The pandemic has clearly significantly impacted on our normal practises of considering our budget setting on a continuous basis, working across services in identifying efficiencies and budget reduction options and delivering on them early. The focus of our service managers has clearly and appropriately been prioritised on supporting and protecting our residents, businesses and communities.
- 8.4 Notwithstanding this however, our senior finance officers have continued to work alongside service managers and have again identified budget reduction measures which can be delivered without adversely impacting on our front-line services. Indeed, at as the quarter 2 performance report presented to Cabinet on the 17th November 2020, we were able to release £767k of in year base budget reductions.
- 8.5 Whilst at a slightly lower level than previous years, we have now identified efficiencies amounting to £4.6M which can be delivered and removed from next year's base budget requirement.

9.0 BUDGET STRATEGY PROPOSALS

- 9.1 This Council has taken a proactive approach to dealing with the budget pressures it continues to face including delivery of saving proposals early with a clear focus maintained across the medium term planning horizon. The Council has continued to deliver robust, balanced budgets and taken the opportunity to use our Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve, as transition funding, to sensibly support the overall budget strategy. This approach is one which I would recommend is continued.

9.2 The Cabinet have always been focussed on protecting our front line services and have taken any opportunities to prioritise or reallocate resources to areas of priority.

9.3 For 2021/22, the following proposals are set out for Cabinet's consideration.

a. **NDR Local Relief Scheme**

Cabinet last year (13th February 2020) determined to implement a local Business Rate Reduction Scheme for 2020/21. The scheme supplemented the Welsh Government High Street and Retail Rate Relief Scheme by providing a further relief of £300 per qualifying business.

It is proposed that this local relief is continued for 2021/22 and increased to £350 per qualifying business.

The cost of this proposal is **£50k**.

b. **Car Park Charges**

Our town centres have been significantly impacted by the restrictions placed on retail, leisure and hospitality businesses plus the need to put in place measures to adhere with social distancing and enhanced cleaning and hygiene regimes. In order to encourage visitors to our town centres and to aid the recovery of our valued businesses, it is proposed that we tailor our car parking charges, noting that in all of our town centres other than Pontypridd and Aberdare, parking is already free.

The proposal is that car parking is free after 3pm on Monday to Fridays and free all day (after 10am) on Saturdays.

The cost of this proposal in terms of income foregone is **£160k**.

c. **Climate Change and Carbon Reduction**

The Council's commitment to responding to climate change and carbon reduction has already been well documented, with the Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group having met regularly since its inaugural meeting in November 2019. The initial work programme set out in December 2019 has been delivered alongside an ambition to be further impactful and a community leader in this area, recognising the wider role that our residents, businesses and partners must play.

In order to support this work, it is proposed that a core base budget is put in place in order that a lead coordination role can be established along with a resource which can commission work from third parties to continue and, where possible increase the pace of our work in this area.

The cost of this proposal is **£100k**.

d. **Graduates**

Our graduate programme has already provided the opportunity for over 100 graduates to join the Council and develop and progress into middle and senior management roles. It is a key part of our workforce planning

strategy and service continuity arrangements, developing our own staff to meet the ongoing and changing needs across our services.

It is proposed that additional resources are set aside to enable a further 6 graduates to be appointed, over and above our existing commitment.

The cost of the proposal is **£200k**.

e. Well-Being Support

The performance and commitment of our staff resources has been exemplary during this period across all of our service areas, demonstrating an outstanding attitude to public service and to the well being of our residents, businesses and communities. This has been set against the backdrop of significant personal challenge for them themselves in terms of the restrictions placed on them and their families and the circumstances in which they have had to perform their responsibilities.

Our staff are without doubt our most valued asset – they are the front face of the Council and represent and uphold our key values as public servants. We recognise the challenges faced by staff and have ensured that we continue to support their welfare and wellbeing. The additional resource proposed will enable us to expand upon the current support programmes we have in place and further develop these programmes across the workforce.

The cost of the proposal is **£50k**.

f. Fees and Charges

A final report on the proposed level of Fees & Charges for 2021/22 will be presented to Cabinet in February 2021. Following the initial (Phase 1) consultation exercise undertaken during November and December, the Cabinet's draft proposals with regard to fees and charges would see a standard increase of 1.7% (CPI), with a number of specific exceptions :

Area of Charge	Proposed Exception
Leisure for Life	Freeze
Car Park Charges	Freeze
Summer and Winter Playing Fees (sports clubs)	Freeze
Meals on Wheels / Day Centre Meals	10p per meal and then frozen until 2023
School Meals	Freeze (as per decision taken in 2020/21 to hold prices until April 2023)
Bereavement Fees	Freeze
Lido / Rhondda Heritage Park	Freeze

The impact of these draft proposals would cost **£185k**.

g. Public Health and Protection Services – Additional Resources

The Public Health and Protection service has played a key role this year in ensuring the public health and wellbeing of our communities, providing advice and guidance and leading on initiatives such as the Test Trace Protect programme.

The additional investment proposed in the service will enable additional resources to be employed, further strengthening the team and providing future resilience for the service.

The cost of the proposal is **£200k**.

h. Flood Prevention Support

Our communities continue to recover from the exceptional storm events during last winter, including Storm Dennis. Significant recovery work is ongoing across the County Borough to the infrastructure damaged.

Over 1,000 homes and 400 businesses were flooded during Storm Dennis. It is proposed that alongside all other support being provided, that an advisory role is put in place to ensure that our residents and businesses are supported in protecting themselves as far as possible from any storm damage, including for example insurance availability and physical property protection opportunities.

The cost of this proposal is **£50k**.

i. Overgrowth Team

Our local environment remains a key priority of the Council, keeping our physical places clean, removing eyesores and ensuring that our natural resources are appropriately maintained. We already have a number of teams who are responsible for ensuring that our overgrowth is effectively maintained and it is proposed that an additional team is put in place to further enhance this work.

The cost of this proposal is **£75k**.

- 9.4 The implications of the above strategy proposals, including the proposed level of Council Tax increase (para 6) and the delivery of efficiencies (para 8), on the remaining budget gap position is shown in table 5 below.

Table 5 : Budget Strategy Proposals 2021/22

	£'000	£'000
Remaining Budget Gap		4,057
Council Tax at 2.65%	182	
Efficiencies	- 4,600	
NDR Discretionary Relief	50	
Fees and Charges	185	
Car Park Charges	160	
Climate Change and Carbon Reduction	100	
Graduates	200	
Well being Support	50	
Public Health and Protection - Additional Resources	200	
Flood Prevention Support	50	
Overgrowth Team	75	- 3,348
Remaining Budget Gap		709

9.5 *Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve (Transitional Funding)* – We have for many years used our transition funding reserve sensibly as part of our balanced budget strategy, at a level which does not compromise the robustness of our budget and which can be replenished with some certainty, given our ongoing strategy of delivering savings early.

9.6 As previously referenced the reserve currently stands at £4.330M, having been replenished during this year (2020/21) by £0.767M to quarter 2. Accordingly, to address the remaining budget gap, it is proposed that an allocation of £0.709M is made from this reserve for 2021/22. This would facilitate a balanced budget for 2021/22 and would leave £3.621M in the reserve (subject to the year-end assessment of reserves). I am confident that processes are now sufficiently well embedded to ensure that savings are achieved in-year and that this reserve can continue to be replenished.

	£'000
Remaining Budget Gap	709
Use of Transition Funding	- 709
Remaining Budget Gap	-

9.7 The above provides a robust and balanced budget strategy which can be recommended to Cabinet and Council.

10.0 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLANNING

10.1 Whilst the focus for this report is necessarily on 2021/22, the pressures on our services and the absence of any firm indications of future settlement levels means that our Medium Term Financial and Service Planning arrangements remain key to ensuring that financial stability is maintained as the cornerstone of our overall financial health as a Council.

10.2 Medium Term Service Planning remains extremely challenging in the absence of any indication or certainty of ongoing funding levels and it will be critical that we maintain our flexibility to respond accordingly to annual settlement levels within the context of our own medium term planning arrangements.

- 10.3 The delivery of efficiency savings early and as part of our medium term planning has positioned us extremely well in our ability to respond to funding challenges and uncertainties and continues to contribute to the delivery of a lean, efficient and effective organisation.
- 10.4 The future quantum of such savings however must be considered and reflected upon in light of what has been delivered to date (£100M over the last 10 years) and what can reasonably continue to be delivered without impacting on our front line services and having an unintended consequence elsewhere.

11.0 SERVICE PRIORITIES

- 11.1 Even within a period of significantly reducing resources and hence financial pressure on all services, this Council remains committed as far as it possibly can to continue to deliver its key services, stronger communities and social justice. The Council's Corporate Plan 2020-2024 sets out that our key purpose is to provide strong community leadership and create the environment for people and businesses to be independent, healthy and prosperous.
- 11.2 The Senior Leadership Team have had due regard to the plan in formulating the proposals set out in this report.
- 11.3 In addition to our revenue base budget requirements, opportunities also continue to be taken to deliver investment in key strategic areas through one off funding made available via a risk based review of earmarked reserves and through identification of in-year savings opportunities. The Council has already invested over £107M (over and above the normal Capital Programme) in areas supporting key Corporate Plan priorities since October 2015, the latest investment (£11.8M) being agreed by Council in March 2020.
- 11.4 A report setting out the updated capital programme for 2021/22 to 2023/24 will be reported for Members consideration shortly.

12.0 2021/22 SERVICE GROUP BUDGETS

- 12.1 The Council adopts a comprehensive budget challenge process involving finance officers and senior managers from each Service area, with a subsequent detailed review and assessment being conducted by the Senior Leadership Team, to ensure consistency and fairness across all service areas.
- 12.2 The 2020/21 revenue budget and the regular performance monitoring reports are available to the Cabinet, to act as a benchmark to evaluate service delivery options, priorities and savings proposals. It is, of course, important to note that the current year's figures are for information purposes only and are not meant to represent a base service requirement, or target. Indeed, budget provision for next year could be more, or less, than the 2020/21 levels, depending upon Members' decisions and spending priorities, and following the impact of the 2021/22 local government settlement.
- 12.3 All of our services have recently completed service recovery plans that have set out key actions for their recovery from the pandemic, locking in transformation and new service delivery models where appropriate. Funding

will be a key consideration for these plans and the Senior Leadership Team's budget proposals are intended to underpin these actions. This will allow the budget to be built "bottom up", on the basis of properly identified service need, within the framework provided by the Cwm Taf Wellbeing Plan and our own Corporate Plan.

- 12.4 Members will, of course, be keen to demonstrate that the Council is properly discharging all its statutory obligations, but with funding at a premium, will also wish to ensure that our services are being delivered in the most economic, efficient and effective manner. The basic principle which should, therefore, underpin the construction of the 2021/22 budget, is that Members will look to target adequate funding towards the delivery of our key services whilst, at the same time, ensuring that the resultant Council Tax levied next year is reasonable and can be justified to our residents. Attached at Appendix 4 is an outline budget proposal, including efficiency and service funding requirements. This is based on a Council Tax increase of 2.65%.

13.0 THE 2021/22 GENERAL BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION PROCESS

- 13.1 As in previous years, the Council has been keen to consult with the public and other interested stakeholders on its general budget strategy and how services are delivered.

- 13.2 The proposed approach to budget consultation for 2021/22 is set out in the Cabinet report dated 13th October 2020. It comprises 2 phases as follows:

Phase 1 - provided residents and stakeholders with the opportunity to feedback their views on some of the key strategic building blocks used to construct the Council's budget.

Phase 2 - once Cabinet have agreed a draft budget strategy, and in light of the provisional local government settlement, then this draft strategy will itself be consulted upon as part of Phase 2.

- 13.3 The Phase 1 Consultation report has been available to support the preparation of these proposals, and is attached at Appendix 5.

- 13.4 The general budget consultation also incorporated the requirements to consult on discretions available locally for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (which has been used to inform the Council's decision on its scheme for 2021/22 as considered by Council on the 20th January 2021).

- 13.5 In addition, specific consultation activity was undertaken with the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum the minutes of which are attached at Appendix 6 and Appendix 7 respectively.

14.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 14.1 On the 22nd December 2020, the Minister for Housing and Local Government (Julie James MS) announced the Provisional 2021/22 Local Government Settlement which showed this Council's increase in resources was set at 3.8%.

- 14.2 Whilst the Council's overall financial position remains sound, its level of General Fund Balances are not excessive. The Council must, therefore, retain its focus on restoring a minimum level of General Fund Balances of £10M, in order to mitigate any risk of future budget instability. Alongside this, there is the opportunity to pragmatically use the Medium Term Financial Planning and Service Transformation Reserve as transitional funding without compromising the Council's financial stability, or reducing our General Fund Balances. As detailed in the report, the use of such transitional funding would produce a balanced budget for 2021/22.
- 14.3 This Council has continued to deliver year on year robust and balanced budgets alongside an investment programme supporting key priorities. The challenge remains however, for positive and proactive management from the Senior Leadership Team and clear direction from Cabinet to produce a financially sustainable budget into the medium term in what continues to be an extremely challenging and uncertain financial climate.

BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE RULES

1. The Framework for Executive Decisions

The Council will be responsible for the adoption of its policy framework and budget as set out in Article 4. The policy framework and budget adopted by the Council will be based on that proposed by the Executive. Once a budget or a policy framework is in place, it will be the responsibility of the Executive to implement it.

2. Process for Developing the Framework

(a) The Cabinet, following detailed reports from respective Chief Officers, (following appropriate consultation with stakeholders) will present to Council, proposed plans, policies and the associated annual budgets. This will be done allowing adequate time for Council to deal with the matter and, if needed, refer the matter back to the Executive for further consideration.

(b) The Council will consider the proposals of the Cabinet and may adopt them, amend them, refer them back to the Cabinet for further consideration, or substitute its own proposals in their place. In considering the matter, the Council shall have before it the Executive's proposals and any related report from the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee. Any amendments to the proposals of the Cabinet to be proposed by Members at Council may not be considered by Council unless notice of the proposed amendment has been given in writing, by fax or via e-mail (with the names of the Proposer and Seconder clearly stated) to the Proper Officer and signed by the Proposer not later than 5:00pm at least 8 clear working days (not including the date of the meeting) before the date of the Council meeting.

(c) Any proposed amendment by a Member of the Council to the proposals of the Cabinet and made in accordance with paragraph 2 (b) above shall only be accepted and submitted to full Council for consideration if in the opinion of the Proper Officer (in consultation with advice sought from the Monitoring Officer and s151 Officer) it is deemed to be legal and within the competence of the Council.

(d) The Council's decision will be publicised and a copy shall be given to the Leader. The notice of decision shall be dated and shall state either that the decision shall be effective immediately (if the Council accepts the Cabinet's proposals without amendment) or (if the Cabinet's proposals are not accepted without amendment), that the Council's decision will become effective on the expiry of 5 working days after the publication of the notice of decision, unless the Leader objects to it in that period.

(e) If the Leader objects to the decision of the Council, he/she shall give written notice to the Chief Executive to that effect, prior to the date upon which the decision is to be effective. The written notification must state the reasons for the objection.

Where such notification is received, the Chief Executive shall convene a further meeting of the Council to reconsider its decision and the decision shall not be effective pending that meeting.

(f) The Council meeting must take place within 21 working days of the receipt of the Leader's written objection. At that Council meeting, the decision of the Council shall be reconsidered in the light of the objection, which shall be available in writing for the Council.

(g) The Council shall, at that meeting, make its final decision on the matter on the basis of a simple majority. The decision shall be made public in accordance with Article 4 and shall be implemented immediately.

(h) All policy and budget reports presented to Council for decision shall subsequently be presented to the next calendar Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

2021/22 BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING TIMETABLE

13th October 2020

Cabinet

- Consider the Council's updated Medium Term Financial Plan 2020/21 to 2023/24
- Consider the approach to Budget Consultation for 2021/22

26th October to 7th December 2020 (6 Weeks)

Consultation (Phase 1) – Budget Consultation Phase 1 (including Council Tax Reduction Scheme)

22nd December 2020

Provisional Local Government Settlement - Receipt of provisional settlement figures further to WG Budget on the 21st December

20th January 2021

Council Meeting – Report on the Implications of the Provisional Settlement

28th January 2021

Cabinet Meeting – Consideration of draft Senior Leadership Team budget strategy options and for Cabinet to formulate their draft budget strategy, taking into account feedback from Phase 1 of the Budget Consultation process

29th January 2021 to 12th February 2021

Consultation (Phase 2) – Consultation on the Cabinet's draft budget strategy

25th February 2021

Cabinet Meeting – To consider the feedback from the Phase 2 Consultation and to agree the Cabinet's final budget strategy for recommending to Council

2nd March 2021

Final Local Government Settlement – Receipt of final settlement figures

10th March 2021

Council Meeting – Cabinet to submit its 2021/22 Budget Strategy and Council Tax levels to Council

Council Decision :

- Approve the 2021/22 Revenue Budget

- Approve the 2021/22 Council Tax (including necessary formal Council Tax Resolution)



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **Provisional Local Government Settlement 2021-22**

DATE **22 December 2020**

BY **Julie James MS, Minister for Housing and Local Government**

Today I am publishing details of the core funding allocations for unitary authorities for the forthcoming financial year through the Provisional Local Government Revenue and Capital Settlements for 2021-22 (the Settlement).

Adjusting for transfers, the core revenue funding for local government in 2021-22 will increase by 3.8% on a like-for-like basis compared to the current year. In 2021-22, local authorities will receive £4.65 billion from the Welsh Government in core revenue funding and non-domestic rates to spend on delivering key services.

In addition to this, I am publishing information on revenue and capital grants planned for 2021-22. These amount to nearly £1 billion for revenue and over £720 million for capital. The Government is providing these indicative grant values and distributions now so that local authorities are able to plan their budgets efficiently. This information will be further updated for the final settlement.

As set out in yesterday's draft budget the Welsh Government's funding priorities continue to be health and local government services. While I know local government has been facing significant pressures, particularly arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope that this increase, building as it does on a significantly improved settlement in 2020-21, enables Authorities to continue to support and deliver critical and valued local services. In setting the overall Settlement at this level the Government has responded to the negative impact of the pandemic on Non Domestic Rate (NDR) collection. The baseline Settlement increase of £176m reflects a larger increase in the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) to compensate for the fall in NDR. It also accounts for the impact of freezing the NDR multiplier. After adjusting for transfers into the Settlement, this equates to an increase of £172 million in Settlement funding, compared with 2020-21.

The Minister for Finance and Trefnydd was clear in the draft budget that one of the hard choices we have faced in setting our spending plans for next year is our approach to public sector pay. The reality is that we did not receive any additional funding through the Barnett

formula to provide for public sector wide pay awards next year given the UK Government's decision to pause public sector pay rises, with the exception of the NHS and those on the lowest wages. The implications of pay awards in 2021-22 will therefore need to be accommodated within Authorities' budget planning in the light of this Settlement. Our decisions in the budget, target as much support as we can to health and local government to support pressure in frontline services focusing on schools and social services.

Whilst we did not receive any additional funding from the UK Government for public sector pay, in determining the distribution of funding across authorities for the Settlement, we have recognised the decisions made on the 2020/21 teachers' pay deal and the commitment made by local government to fund this deal by directing funding into the schools part of the formula. We are also continuing to provide funding for our proposals for new eligibility criteria for free school meals, given the continued rollout of Universal Credit by the UK Government.

Through this Settlement, we are continuing to provide £4.8 million for authorities to deliver additional discretionary rates relief for local businesses and other ratepayers to respond to specific local issues.

In line with the Government's focus on countering the effects of poverty, we remain committed to protecting vulnerable and low-income households from any reduction in support under the Council Tax Reduction Schemes, despite the shortfall in the funding transferred by the UK Government following its abolition of Council Tax Benefit. We will continue to maintain full entitlements under our Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) for 2021-22 and are again providing £244 million for CTRS in the Settlement in recognition of this.

Alongside the Settlement we are continuing to provide funding to support local government to waive fees for child burials. This shared commitment ensures a fair and consistent approach across Wales.

I am not minded to provide for a funding floor for this year given the increased settlement for 2020-21 and the proposed allocations I am announcing today for 2021-22. I have accordingly allocated all the funding available up front.

A wide range of services of course have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. As the Finance Minister's statement on the budget made clear, we recognise the need to continue to provide funding to support Local Government's response to the pandemic. This will be considered separately and does not form part of this Settlement.

This Settlement provides Local Authorities with a stable platform for planning their budgets for the forthcoming financial year. I fully appreciate the pressures local government is facing and am committed to protecting local government, particularly at this difficult and challenging time. This is as good a Settlement as the Government can offer and one which should help to alleviate some of the pressures Authorities are anticipating. While I can't guarantee that there will be no changes between the provisional and final settlements, due to the financial uncertainty that we currently face, I do not intend making any significant changes to the methodology or the data underpinning the distribution of this Settlement.

Attached to this statement is a summary table setting out the Settlement allocations by authority. The allocations are derived using the formula agreed with local government. As a result of the formula and related data, the table shows the range of the funding allocations, from a 2.0% increase over the 2020-21 settlement to a 5.6% increase.

Further details on the Settlement will be sent to all local authorities and published on the Welsh Government's website:

<https://gov.wales/local-government-revenue-and-capital-settlement-2021-2022>

General capital funding for 2021-22 will continue to be set at £198 million. Included within this amount is £20 million for the continuation of the public highways refurbishment grant, including support for active travel; £54 million of historic baselined general capital grant; and the continuation of an additional £35 million of general capital grant, which was announced as part of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 budgets. This additional £35 million will enable Authorities to begin to respond to our joint priority of decarbonisation, including for housing and economic recovery following Covid-19.

We have discussed, before, our shared recognition of the need to invest in the supply of housing. Investing in social housing should minimise the pressures on local authority budgets and on homelessness services. Investment in housing can also support the Welsh economy and local economies. I hope that this Settlement, capital and revenue, can support Authorities in increasing the scale and pace of housebuilding across Wales.

I know that Authorities will need to make choices in setting their budgets. They will need to engage meaningfully with their local communities as they consider their budget priorities. The setting of budgets, and in turn council tax, is the responsibility of each local authority and authorities will need to take account of the full range of sources of funding available to them, as well as the pressures they face, in setting their budgets for the coming year.

This announcement commences the formal seven-week consultation on the provisional local government settlement. This will end on 9 February 2021.

This statement is being issued during recess in order to keep members informed. Should members wish me to make a further statement or to answer questions on this when the Senedd returns I would be happy to do so.

Summary Table

2021-22 provisional settlement – comparison of 2020-21 AEF (adjusted for transfers) and 2021-22 provisional AEF, and distribution of the 2020-21 Council Tax Reduction Schemes funding (distributed within AEF) (£000s)

Unitary authority	2020-21 adjusted AEF ¹	2021-22 provisional AEF	% change on adjusted 2020-21 AEF	Rank	Council Tax Reduction Schemes (within AEF)
Isle of Anglesey	101,369	104,825	3.4%	18	5,186
Gwynedd	188,409	194,793	3.4%	19	8,541
Conwy	161,181	166,906	3.6%	17	9,138
Denbighshire	153,089	158,632	3.6%	16	8,920
Flintshire	199,267	206,778	3.8%	14	9,609
Wrexham	184,569	188,856	2.3%	21	9,062
Powys	184,554	191,897	4.0%	8	8,775
Ceredigion	107,545	109,658	2.0%	22	5,122
Pembrokeshire	172,502	179,387	4.0%	7	8,187
Carmarthenshire	274,355	284,820	3.8%	13	13,996
Swansea	339,445	352,642	3.9%	10	19,264
Neath Port Talbot	227,198	236,680	4.2%	6	15,977
Bridgend	203,540	212,192	4.3%	5	13,088
The Vale Of Glamorgan	160,455	168,316	4.9%	2	9,062
Rhondda Cynon Taf	389,403	404,375	3.8%	11	21,936
Merthyr Tydfil	96,973	101,476	4.6%	3	5,595
Caerphilly	283,708	292,367	3.1%	20	12,372
Blaenau Gwent	116,112	120,361	3.7%	15	8,067
Torfaen	140,308	146,340	4.3%	4	8,331
Monmouthshire	97,673	101,483	3.9%	9	5,753
Newport	228,000	240,796	5.6%	1	10,083
Cardiff	469,913	487,913	3.8%	12	27,934
All Unitary Authorities	4,479,570	4,651,494	3.8%		244,000

Note: Total may not sum correctly due to rounding

1. 2020-21 AEF adjusted transfers of £5.127m (at 2020-21 prices) into the Settlement

AVAILABLE REVENUE RESOURCES 2021/22 AND PROPOSED USAGE

	£'000
Total resources available in 2021/22	527,901
LESS: Total resources available in 2020/21	508,747
<u>INCREASE</u> in resources available in 2021/22	19,154

	£'000
Allocation of Resources	
Delegated Schools Budget	2,206
Education & Inclusion Services	1,359
Community & Children's Services	8,689
Prosperity, Development and Frontline Services	5,027
Chief Executive	(230)
Authority Wide Requirements	2,103
	19,154

PROPOSED REVENUE BUDGET 2021/22

Education & Inclusion Services

Delegated Schools Budgets

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	161,578
Increase	2,206
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	163,784

Non Delegated Budgets

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	31,049
Base and Inflationary Pressures	2,270
General Efficiencies	(911)
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	32,408

Total Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	196,192
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Community & Children's Services

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	162,681
Base and Inflationary Pressures	10,995
General Efficiencies	(2,306)
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	171,370

Prosperity, Development and Frontline Services

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	55,928
Base and Inflationary Pressures	5,564
General Efficiencies	(537)
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	60,955

Chief Executive

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	27,039
Base and Inflationary Pressures	616
General Efficiencies	(846)
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	26,809

Authority Wide

	£'000
Net Revenue Budget 2020/21	70,472
Increase	2,103
Proposed Net Revenue Budget 2021/22	72,575

Use of Reserves (Transition Funding)	(709)
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Budget Consultation 2021/22

(Phase 1)

*Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough
Council*

December 2020



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This section provides a summary of the main findings from the Phase 1 Budget Consultation 2021/22.
- The consultation was conducted in-house using a digital by default approach, supplemented by off-line alternatives. Phase 1 of the consultation started on the 26th October and ended on the 7th December 2020.
- 1,044 online survey responses were received.
- The majority of respondents felt that the Council should protect services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax (76.8%).
- Respondents were also asked what their preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year would be. The results show that the majority of respondents (59%) would prefer a 2.85% increase (the current modelled level), with 24.4% stating less than 2.85%.
- 81.5% of respondents agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools.
- Respondents were asked to state which services they would want to protect from an increase in fees and charges in 2021/22. The majority (i.e. 50% or more) of respondents felt that fees and charges for the following services should be frozen (no increase);
 - Bereavement Fees (60.7%);
 - Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals (58.8%);
 - Car Parking Charges (57.5%); and
 - Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services) (55.2%).
- Respondents were provided with a list of Council services and asked to choose which services they felt should be protected and prioritised for any additional resources in 2021/22. The top 3 services that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;
 - Children's Social Care Services (95.5%);
 - Schools (92.1%); and
 - Public Health (91.9%);
- 94% of respondents agreed with the Council's approach to efficiencies and 93.6% said that we should continue to expect our managers to deliver more efficient services.
- 82.6% of respondents stated that the Council should continue with its strategy on reserves.

- Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should invest in a number of service areas. The majority of respondents agreed that the Council should invest in all of the areas suggested, with the most support for investment in Flood Alleviation (93.8%).
- A virtual engagement session was held with members of the OPAG (Older Persons Advisory Group) and Disability Forum. Comments are found in section 5 of the report.
- The Council's Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum were consulted (the minutes of which have not been included in this report) and engagement took place with the Community Liaison Committee.
- We held 5 virtual sessions and spoke to pupils from St John Baptist Church In Wales High School, Aberdare Community School, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Y Pant Comprehensive School. We also engaged with learners from Coleg Y Cymoedd in Aberdare, Rhondda and Treforest campuses. The results of these engagements are included in section 6 of the report.
- Over 1,100 people were engaged in the phase 1 budget consultation process.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of the Phase 1 Budget Consultation 2021/22.
- 1.2 Section 2 outlines some brief background to the consultation process.
- 1.3 Section 3 details the methodology.
- 1.4 Section 4 provides the results of the online questionnaire.
- 1.5 Section 5 presents the feedback received via virtual meetings, including the Older Persons Advisory Group and Disability Forum.
- 1.6 Section 6 provides feedback on the young persons' virtual engagement events.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council undertakes a comprehensive approach to its annual budget consultation, involving a large number of residents and key stakeholders.
- 2.2 The widespread approach we use and the range of views we capture provides senior managers and Cabinet Members with the necessary information they need to set the budget for the year ahead. In addition, we have found that the vast amount of information we collect can also be valuable for service managers to use for their service planning and development.
- 2.3 The comprehensive approach undertaken in the last few years has led to increased engagement in the budget consultation process through a more interactive and varied approach.
- 2.4 The current COVID-19 pandemic brings challenges for public engagement and consultation, where in Rhondda Cynon Taf we have developed a very successful face to face approach with residents and other stakeholders in recent years.
- 2.5 The approach we have used this year aims to continue the positive work by ensuring that all residents and service users have every opportunity to provide feedback. The 2021/22 budget consultation took on a 'digital by default' approach, whilst continuing to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods.
- 2.6 This report presents the findings of phase 1 of the budget consultation, where views were sought on:
- The level of Council Tax increase;
 - The resources allocated to our schools;
 - Fees and charges;
 - Protection and prioritisation of services for additional resources;
 - Delivering more efficient services;
 - Council priorities, investment opportunities and Council reserves
 - The Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- 2.7 Phase 1 of the consultation started on the 26th October and ended on the 7th December 2020.
- 2.8 Phase 2 of the consultation will commence in January 2021 and will seek to obtain views on the proposed Budget Strategy for 2021/22.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The 'digital by default' approach included the following methods to consult with a range of stakeholders:

- An online survey to collect responses on key issues, such as Council investment areas, Council Tax levels and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- The use of social media to communicate the key messages to residents and service users, and encourage engagement and feedback regarding the Council's budget and investment areas.
- Emails distributed to all key stakeholders (including the Council's Citizens' Panel, Councillors, Council staff and schools within Rhondda Cynon Taf).
- The option to attend Public Zoom meetings.
- Online zoom seminars with young people in Schools and Colleges.
- An online Disability Forum Meeting.
- An online Older Persons Advisory Group Meeting.
- Online meetings with the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee and the School Budget Forum.
- Online meeting with the Community Liaison Committee.

3.2 As listed above, to replace our usual face to face engagement, we provided the option of virtual meetings to outline the budget approach, answer questions and collect views. These online (Zoom) events used a video presentation for the first time - https://youtu.be/X_DAVVIVDfY The video was then followed by a discussion with online attendees.

3.3 We provided a number of alternatives to online engagement, as it is important to continue to consider hard to reach groups, those having reduced or no access to the Internet and those who prefer to engage through traditional methods. This included:

- A telephone consultation option working with the Council's Contact Centre. The Contact Centre number was made available for people to discuss their views or as a minimum to request consultation materials.
- Individual call backs were offered if required.
- Paper surveys and information available on request.
- Consultation freepost address for postal responses.

3.4 We designed an Easy Read/Plain English Document in paper format and online, to simplify some of the consultation materials.

3.5 Over 1,100 people were engaged in the phase 1 budget consultation.

4 Questionnaire Results

- 4.1 The following section outlines the results from the budget questionnaire, which received 1,044 online responses. A selection of comments are provided and the full list of comments will be provided to Cabinet and senior officers to assist with decision making.

Council Tax

- 4.2 The majority of respondents felt that the Council should protect services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax (76.8%).

Table 1: Council Tax preference

	%
Do you think the Council should.....	
Protect Council services at their current level through a 2.85% increase in Council Tax	76.8
Reduce service levels to close any budget gap and keep any increase in Council Tax to a minimum	23.2

- 4.3 Those who agreed with the 2.85% modelled increase to protect services felt it was important to keep services at their current level and the Council should not cut services. A selection of comments fed back were:

“Council tax rise under 3% in RCT is manageable, some councils doing over 5% is wholly unacceptable”

“2.85% is a decent increase personally thinking and maybe even an increase of 3% would still mean RCT is below the average increase in Wales.”

“I would rather pay a small amount more and protect services. The increases in RCT over recent years seem to be small and sensible so I’d support a small increase this year”

“As an RCT resident, I think a 2.85% increase is not too much to ask, if it means that more money goes towards the services that are vital to today’s pandemic society.”

“Happy to agree 2.85% as that’s less the 75p a week extra for my household”

Of those who did not agree with an increase of 2.85% the main reason was affordability. Feedback included:

“2020 has been a hard year for many reasons, with many people losing employment. A large increase on ctax would seem unfair due to the current circumstances. Increase the following financial year to give people/Country a chance to recover”

“At the current time and given job uncertainty, especially in the private sector. Any increases in council tax should be kept to a minimum.”

4.4 Respondents were also asked what their preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year would be. The results show that the majority of respondents (59%) would prefer a 2.85% increase (the current modelled level), with 24.4% stating less than 2.85%, 11.2% suggesting an increase of more than 3% and 5.3% indicating more than 4%.

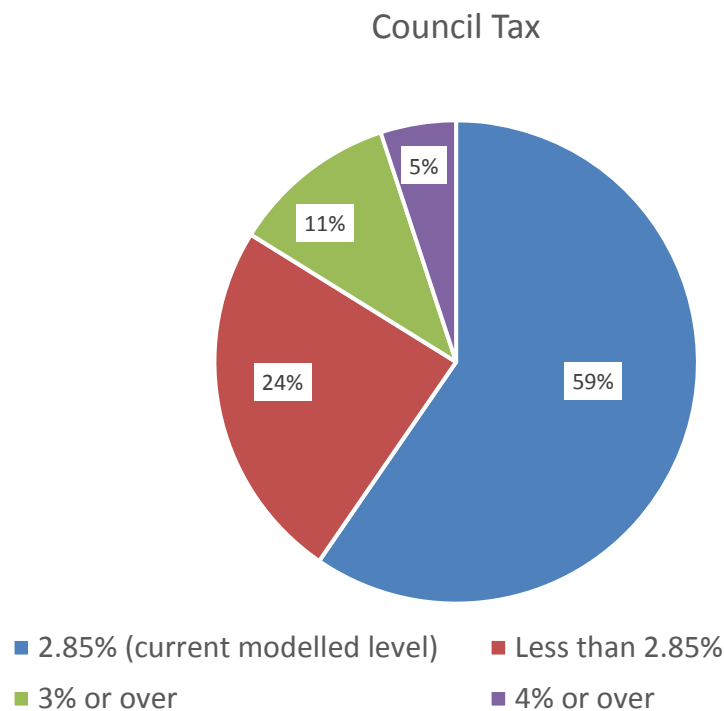


Figure 1 - Preferred level of Council Tax increase

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Schools Budget

- 4.5 81.5% of respondents agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools.

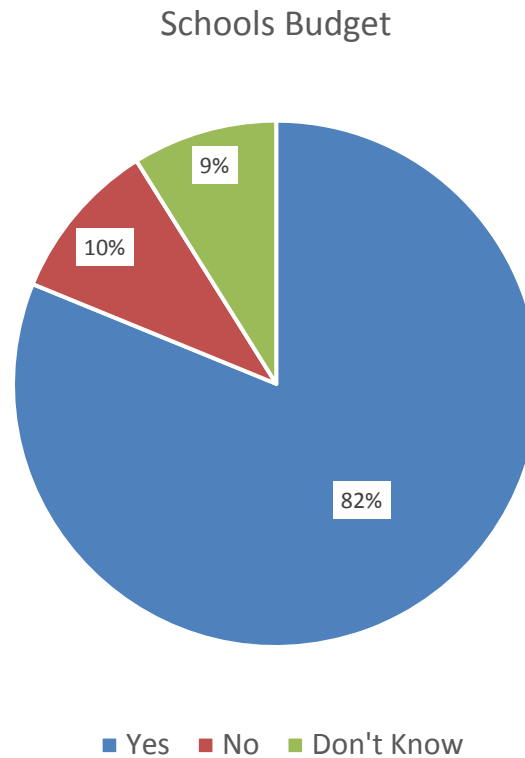


Figure 2 - Agreement with Schools Budget increase

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Fees and Charges

- 4.6 Respondents were asked their views on fees and charges levels for 2021/22, based on the modelled assumption that they would be increased by 1.7% (i.e. the Consumer Price Index (CPI)). Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Fees and charges levels

Analysis % Respondents			
	CPI (increase (1.7%))	Higher than CPI (higher than 1.7% increase)	Freeze (no increase)
Leisure Centre Pay and Play	48.1	9.5	42.4
Summer and Winter Playing Fees (Sports Clubs)	41.4	10.9	47.7
Car Parking Charges	31.0	11.5	57.5
Cinema (entrance fee)	50.8	19.0	30.2
Pontypridd Lido (entry for adult users)	52.0	21.1	27.0
Rhondda Heritage park	57.5	16.5	26.0
Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals	32.6	8.9	58.8
Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services)	36.1	8.7	55.2
Bereavement Fees	33.5	5.8	60.7
Fixed Penalty Notice (for environmental crimes e.g., Fly Tipping)	15.8	77.7	6.5

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

4.7 The table shows that the majority (i.e. 50% or more) of respondents felt that fees and charges for the following services should be frozen (no increase);

- Car Parking Charges (57.5%);
- Meals on Wheels and Day Centre Meals (58.8%);
- Adult Social Care Charges (non-residential care services) (55.2%); and
- Bereavement Fees (60.7%).

Those services with a majority supporting an increase at 1.7% (i.e. the CPI level) were;

- Cinema (entrance fee) (50.8%);
- Pontypridd Lido (52.0%); and
- Rhondda Heritage Park (57.5%).

It is worth noting that 77.7% of respondents suggested an increase higher than the CPI for fixed penalty notices, with only 6.5% suggesting a freeze.

- 4.8 A selection of comments provided by respondents on fees and charges levels are provided below, noting that a number of comments refer to the on-going Coronavirus pandemic as a factor.

Overall

“Any service or provision that is entertainment related should be subject to rate of inflation.”

“Due to pandemic some of these have not been accessible so to increase the cost would be another financial burden for the communities”

“Due to the impact of lockdown and many people having reduced hours in work etc, it hardly seems appropriate to increase entry fees and parking charges”.

Leisure

“After the awful time everyone has had leisure needs to be kept affordable”

“I think supporting leisure centres and sports activities is extremely important next year. It is so important for mental health”

“leisure and sports clubs as well as cinemas are struggling in the pandemic and I believe that extra charges for currently reduced services would be detrimental to the services they provide”

Summer and Winter Playing Fees (Sports Clubs)

“I think it has already been a very difficult year for sports clubs where they have been unable to raise money due to C-19.”

“Summer and winter playing fees should be increased however, more funding should be found for improved facilities to enhance participation which in turn improves wellbeing and health across the County.”

“With the current pandemic, sports and leisure centres are the only places some people are leaving the house for, and it supports health and wellbeing, increasing prices at the moment may cause a wider issue where people can't afford to use the facilities and aren't leaving the home, in addition to working from home people may become more isolated.”

Car Parking Charges

“Car parking ensures local towns are utilised to support local business, raising the fees will stop people using the towns ...”

“Car parking should be frozen to support businesses on the high street to recover after the pandemic.”

“Car park charges impact town centre viability - need to promote other modes but public transport difficult during C19”

Cinema

“I think it is fair to increase the prices of optional leisure services i.e., cinema”

“Cinema, Heritage park are luxuries so should increase above CPI”

“Where services are purely for leisure, eg, optional, such as cinema or leisure centre pay and play, they could be increased.”

Pontypridd Lido

“the lido... however things that benefit health and wellbeing should be frozen.”

“There are some things that I agree with raising the cost such as the lido, if this is for adults only as this help raise money after the damage caused by the floods earlier in the year.”

“As an adult with no children I feel it would be unfair for me to have to pay more to use the lido to further subsidise free access to children when many families earn more than me”

Rhondda Heritage Park

“The heritage park should also see an increase in fees paid by visitors.”

“The Heritage Park is a museum and to keep people going there the cost must be affordable. An increase in price will put people off.”

Meals on Wheels

“Meals on Wheels and Day Centre meals should be frozen so that the most vulnerable can continue to enjoy a warm cooked meal.”

“Meals on wheels have been critical for many and I think increasing their fee would not be fair since they have no other means to get what they need.”

“Essentials like Social Care and MOW should be frozen, as during the pandemic, service users will rely on these even more and if prices rise, those that need it the most may not be able to pay for it.”

Adult Social Care Charges

“Adult social care charges should be increased though as you need to recruit more social workers especially after the pressures C-19 has put on people.”

“Fees on uncontrollable events and requirements should not be increased, as it's not something people choose to need. Examples include Bereavement Fees and Adult Social Care.”

Bereavement Fees

“At a time when people are being hit with increased bereavement, I think that this should be frozen”

“especially bereavement fees are hitting people when they are already vulnerable.”

“Agree with increase...except for Bereavement fees”

Fixed penalty notices

“Be more realistic with fines for fly tipping. It needs to be high as a deterrent”

“For fly tipping I think this should be increased significantly.”

“Anything like environmental crimes should see the biggest increase in charge, as well as noise nuisance and backyard fires, things that are affecting not just the environment but the people who live in RCT.”

Council Services

- 4.9 Respondents were provided with a list of Council services and asked to choose which services they felt should be protected and prioritised for any additional resources in 2021/22 and those that should not be protected.

Table 3: Council services to be protected and prioritised

	%’s	
	Protect and Prioritise	Do Not Protect
Schools (Current budget £161.6M)	92.1	7.9

School Support Services (£42.3M)	84.9	15.1
Libraries and Adult Learning (£2.3M)	61.3	38.7
Apprenticeship Scheme (£0.23M)	75.0	25.0
Youth Provision (£1.7M)	81.4	18.6
Adult Social Care Services (£97.1M)	90.8	9.2
Children's Social Care Services (£49.8M)	95.5	4.5
Public Health (£4.9M)	91.9	8.1
Housing (£1.1M)	71.1	28.9
Parks and Play Areas (£5.1M)	67.7	32.3
Highways, Transport and Street care Services (£13.9M)	73.1	26.9
Waste and Recycling Services (£18.3M)	79.6	20.4
Cultural, Tourism and Heritage Services (£2.5M)	53.0	47.0
Regeneration / Supporting people out of work (£26.5M)	72.6	27.4
Leisure Services (£3.9M)	59.4	40.6
Music Service (£0.14M)	57.4	42.6

4.10 The **top 3 services** that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;

- Children's Social Care Services (95.5%);
- Schools (92.1%); and
- Public Health (91.9%).

4.11 The **bottom 3 services** that respondents wanted to protect and prioritise were;

- Cultural, Tourism and Heritage Services (53.0%);
- Music Service (57.4%); and
- Leisure Services (59.4%).

Efficiencies

4.12 Respondents were provided with the following statement and asked whether they thought this was a good strategy.

Each year in balancing our budget and ensuring the effective use of resources, all service managers are required to contribute toward a council-wide efficiency (savings) target. This means that all of our services are becoming more efficient, without impacting on front line services.

The majority of respondents thought this was a good strategy (94%) and 93.6% said that we should continue to expect our managers to deliver more efficient services.

- 4.13 The following comments have been placed under themes and provide examples of how respondents felt the Council could be more efficient;

Note: A large number of responses were received to this question and will be available to Councillors and Officers as part of the reporting process.

Enforcement

- 4.14 The Council is limited in how much it can raise fines for some enforcement activity, such as dog fouling. However, as shown in section 4.6 above there is widescale support to increase them where it is possible.

“More fines for fly tipping”

“Increase dog fouling officers and fine heavily”

“Enforcement - more fines for littering/dog fouling/fly tipping”

Digitalisation

- 4.15 A number of comments further support digitalisation, which is one of the Council’s key areas of focus to maximise resources and deliver improved services.

“Reduce back office and move more things online if possible”

“ICT - Self-service for customers. Keep working from home to save on fuel costs, e-expenses”

“Digital transformation is key to simplifying and improving efficiency on services with the public.”

Working from Home

- 4.16 Comments fed back as part of the consultation process support the need for the Council to continue the approach to home working, which was introduced widely across the Council as a result of the pandemic.

“The pandemic has shown that many council workers can work from home this would surely save money if this was continued”

“We've seen that many staff are working adequately, if not better, from home. Do we need to support this as an ongoing way of working and reduce heating bills, cleaning costs for some buildings?”

“Working from home has proved a cost-effective strategy, so councils could become more efficient by closing down office space.”

“With the majority of staff working from home now you could reduce your “office sites”

Difficult to find further Efficiencies

- 4.17 There were some concerns that it may be difficult for the Council to continue to make further efficiencies, on top of those already made in recent years.

“You can only become so efficient before services are affected and I would rather we stop just short of being as efficient as we can this go too far to the detriment of these services”

“I find it difficult to think that there are many more areas for efficiency, given the loss of staff and increased automation in my time with the council.”

Use of external contractors

- 4.18 There was a perception by some that the Council used contractors and there were calls to use them less.

“Better training for council employed staff and investment far outweighs the cost of constantly hiring sub-par contractors.”

“Stop using outside contractors directly employ local people to promote growth for local economy and the welfare of local people and families”

Joint Working

- 4.19 Partnership working was suggested as a way of saving money.

“Bring common council services together in one team / location”

“Share the HR department with other neighbouring local authorities”

Senior Managers

- 4.20 As in previous budget consultations, some of the respondents felt that savings could be made with the Council staff structure.

“Reduce the number of Managers at high levels within RCT and get more resources on the shop floor level”

“Reduce expenditures on directorate and senior management”

Council Reserves

- 4.21 Respondents were provided with the following statement and asked if they thought that the Council should continue with such a strategy in terms of the Council Reserves.

Reserves play an important part of the overall financial management of the Council. The Council's General Reserve balances at 31st March 2019 amounted to £10.498M and following an approved in-year allocation of £1.5M to support the Council's recovery work from Storm Dennis coupled with an in-year overspend of £0.289M, the remaining balance at 31st March 2020 is £8.709M.

The level of general reserves will be kept under on-going review and replenished going forward, as appropriate, and taking into account the financial risks the Council faces.

The majority of respondents (82.6%) think the Council should continue with this strategy.

Any Other Comments

- 4.22 Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any other comments on the budget and the following is a selection of feedback received. There were a large number of comments related to Council reserves, a key factor considered to be the "Any Other Comments" question directly following the "Council Reserves" question.

Reserves

- 4.23 There was a general feeling amongst respondents that having reserves was an important part of the budget strategy.

"Reserves are important, cannot cut reserves"

"Reserves are vital and must be maintained for extraordinary events."

"There should always be an emergency fund for when things out of control happen in RCT. and enough to support individuals as well as businesses and companies."

- 4.24 However, the majority of respondents suggested that some of the reserves should be used to improve services and to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. There was a feeling that now was the time to use them and they could be replenished in subsequent years.

“Although, in principal, I agree with a reserve, this seems a lot of money set aside, just in case! I think at least half of this reserve would be better spent on improving services and pay.”

“Reserves are good however there may be a need to defer recovering next year given added pressures following covid.”

“It is great to see that there is money left behind even after all this turmoil that we've been through this year. Perhaps this has shown that not as much needs to be left behind and more could be used and we'd still have enough as a safety net”

4.25 A number of other comments related to efficiencies and working from home, these being covered in other sections of this report.

4.26 There were also a number of comments that praised the Council for the work it has done and is continuing to do to deal with the impact of the pandemic and flooding, earlier in the year. Comments included;

“Good luck. It’s a thankless task but you lot are bloody good at this. Keep going!”

“Good work in tough times”

“I think all council staff are under such immense pressure, and they are all doing an excellent job giving these trying times.”

“I think the council are doing an amazing job in very difficult financial circumstances and have been for a number of years.”

“It must be incredibly hard to balance the books after 10 years of austerity, but the council has done extremely well this year faced with the floods and Covid-19”

The Council’s Priorities

4.27 The Council focuses on five key areas to maximise resources and deliver improved services.

- **Digitalisation** – taking the opportunity new technology provides to deliver better services for residents, visitors, businesses and how we operate internally;
- **Commercialisation** – utilising our scale and expertise to deliver services for other organisations and customers and thereby generate income;
- **Early Intervention and Prevention** – investing in preventative services to deliver savings in the medium term;

- **Independence** – reshaping our services for vulnerable residents to ensure that we promote independence and deliver first class care services; and
- **Efficient and Effective Organisation** – challenging our ongoing service delivery and driving out further efficiencies through for example, a reduction in administration costs and reducing property costs linked to new ways of working, for example through agile working.

4.28 Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should focus on these key areas. The majority of respondents agreed with all of the key areas, with the highest response being for Early Intervention and Prevention (89.6%).

Table 4: Key areas of focus

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Digitalisation	80.3	10.3	9.4
Commercialisation	70.6	15.4	14.0
Early Intervention and Prevention	89.6	6.3	4.1
Independence	82.0	10.0	8.0
Efficient and Effective Organisation	88.0	6.6	5.4

Council Investment Opportunities

4.29 Respondents were asked if they thought the Council should invest in a number of service areas. The majority of respondents agreed that the Council should invest in all of the areas suggested, with the most support for investment in Flood Alleviation (93.8%).

Table 5: Areas of Investment

Analysis % Respondents	Yes	No	Don't Know
	21st Century Schools (new and remodelled schools)	69.7	19.5
Roads & Transport (repairs and resurfacing and major projects such as A4119 dualling, Llanharan bypass and Mountain Ash Cross Valley link)	74.5	17.3	8.2
Recycling & the Environment (improving recycling performance)	78.2	15.1	6.7
Town Centres & Regeneration (improving the town centres e.g., Llys Cadwyn, Pontypridd)	76.4	16.3	7.3
Empty Properties (Grant to bring properties back into use)	73.2	18.6	8.1
Leisure (improvements to facilities)	57.6	30.8	11.7
Play Areas and Parks (upgrading the equipment and standard)	66.6	23.3	10.1

Extra Care/Community Hubs (focus on independence for older people)	83.8	10.5	5.7
Employment (apprenticeships and graduate placements)	77.0	15.5	7.5
Events/Arts (investment in attractions and theatres)	52.5	32.3	15.3
Flood Alleviation (investing in flood prevention schemes)	93.8	4.2	2.0

Note: The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

- 4.30 The following are a selection of comments received on the Council's investment areas. A number of responses noted that all of the services were important.

"All areas are important to different people in our communities - play areas for young families, apprenticeships for young people to gain skills for employment"

"All entirely commendable areas in which to invest."

"All of these things are essential to provide our residents with a good and balanced environment to live in"

Roads & Transport

"I think there needs to be investment in roads especially where they are found to be in a less than acceptable state and where potholes exist"

"Investment in repairs to side streets should also be given priority."

"roads pavements, making our areas clean, safe and lovely places to live in"

Recycling & the Environment

- 4.31 Positive responses were fed back in respect of the Council's recycling service. In addition, under the environment theme a number of responses were received in relation to climate change issues.

Climate Change

"If the Council is serious in its consideration of the climate and biodiversity emergencies then these must be addressed in the budget.....Revenue funds are necessary if environmental management is to help store carbon, reduce flooding, engage communities, raise awareness, manage our urban green infrastructure etc....."

"Climate change and decarbonisation should be a common theme through each initiative."

“In addition to Flood alleviation, other areas of climate change mitigation and minimisation should be a priority.”

“Invest in climate change measures both physical and operational to meet councils Net Zero goals”

Sustainable Transport

- 4.32 Linked to the climate change comments was feedback on the need to invest in more sustainable transport and to build on the behavioural change brought about by the pandemic.

“The council needs to invest in healthier, sustainable and more affordable alternatives. This should be reworking our towns to prioritise walking and cycling.....The council should be investing in more frequent and comfortable bus journeys and boosting public services to help people get around safely and planning and designing our communities to be accessible to those without a car.....”

“During lockdown, there were fewer cars on the road, the sky was clearer, birdsong was louder, and things seemed calmer. Air pollution plummeted. Many people got more comfortable with the idea of walking, cycling, and using new forms of travel.”

Town Centres & Regeneration

“All important particularly town centre regeneration”

“Invest in the towns (education/infrastructure/health) especially Aberdare (10th biggest in Wales). Please make them the focal point in a post-Covid environment.”

“Improve parking facilities in areas such as Treorchy, Tonypany & Porth so that people have easy access to these town centres.”

Play Areas and Parks

“Different families have different needs - therefore it is important that all areas are considered when investing. e.g., Investment in parks and play areas gives families areas to visit - healthier lifestyle.”

“I think RCT have invested well in Play Areas and Parks, Leisure and Events so I feel there is no need for further investment this year”

“More investment needs to be made in parks to provide better facilities and activities to people in order to help with their mental health and wellbeing.”

Employment (apprenticeships and graduate placements)

“Apprenticeship programme is excellent for the young people, giving them opportunities to train and hopefully gain local employment”

“The apprenticeship programme is great too”

Flood Alleviation (investing in flood prevention schemes)

“A priority should be to build adequate protection against flooding for all residents.”

“Flood defences improvements should come from central government”

“More investment in flood defences is welcomed”

Corporate Plan

- 4.33 In March 2020, the Council agreed a new Corporate Plan ‘Making a Difference’ 2020 – 2024 that set the overall direction for the Council over the four-year period. The Corporate Plan is a key component of the Council’s budgetary and business planning process, and it recognises that Rhondda Cynon Taf Council and the wider public sector continue to face significant financial challenges.

The Council’s vision is: “To be the best place in Wales to live, work and play, where people and businesses are independent, healthy, and prosperous”.

The Council’s purpose is: “To provide strong community leadership and create the environment for people and businesses to be independent, healthy and prosperous”.

89.4% of respondents agreed with the Vision and purpose.

- 4.34 The Council is focused on the following three priorities that have also been adopted as its Well-being objectives in line with the Well-Being of Future Generations Act:

- Ensuring People: are independent, healthy and successful.
- Creating Places: where people are proud to live, work and play; and
- Enabling Prosperity: creating the opportunity for people and businesses to: be innovative; be entrepreneurial; and fulfil their potential and prosper.

92.8% of respondents agreed with these priorities.

5. VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

- 5.1 This section outlines the views collected at the virtual consultation discussions that took place with the Older Person's Advisory Group (OPAG) and Disability Forum. 3 Public Zoom meetings were also arranged at different times of the day, but they did not go ahead due to low take up. The online meetings replaced our usual approach to face to face resident engagement.
- 5.2 A video was used to present the background to the Council's budget and then a set of discussion prompts were used to aid discussion and questions were answered by Finance Officers present.
- 5.3 The engagement session with members of the OPAG was held on the 25th November 2020.
- 5.4 A varied range of feedback was provided by OPAG members on the level of Council Tax. Some of the members thought that 2.85% was reasonable;

"On hearing on what others are doing that is quite reasonable"

"Very reasonable expected it to be higher"

Some OPAG members suggested that it should be higher than 2.85%:

"Think it should be more, maybe 4%, don't know what's going to happen in the next year, but the reality is we are stuck with the current situation and the council is going to need all the money it can get hold of"

However, not all agreed and some OPAG members thought 4% was too high, due to more people out of work as a result of the current pandemic.

"Always managed and done a good job at under 3% in the past"

Those that didn't agree with 4% said they were happy with the 2.85% increase.

- 5.5 Everyone at the OPAG meeting agreed that the school's budget should be increased.
- 5.6 With regard to Fees and Charges levels, there were concerns that the Council would not be generating income from facilities such as car parks and cinema entrance fees, due to the impact of the pandemic and the increase in online shopping.

There was support for an increase in enforcement fees.

“Enforcement, need money increase for fly tipping to discourage people.”

“the fixed penalty notice for environmental crimes should be increased.”

5.7 OPAG as a group agreed that all Council Service Priorities listed should be protected and prioritised. There was a short discussion around the apprenticeship scheme, the take up and the demand for it and general support

5.8 All agreed that the Efficiency Savings strategy outlined was a good one and it was fed back that home working should provide opportunity to support the continued delivery of more efficient services.

5.9 With regard to Council reserves, there was support to utilise reserves to aid the recovery from the pandemic.

“COVID was a good reason to use some of the reserves”

There was also support to keep the reserves for the future.

“Maybe take some out of the reserves to help now, but don’t take it all, as we need back up.”

“We need reserves for saving for emergencies.”

5.10 When the Council’s priority of Digitilisation was discussed, it was noted that not all members of the Older Person’s Forums are online and have chosen to not do so. Forum Members fed back that some of the information the Council provides does not always include a telephone number, just a website address.

5.11 A general comment was made by a member of the OPAG at the virtual meeting.

“Pleasantly surprised how well the Council is doing with the money after the year we have had.”

Disability Forum

5.12 Letters and emails were sent to the Disability Forum, inviting them to attend a virtual meeting on the 1st December 2020. Within the letters, we included Easy Read copies of our Budget survey and gave Forum Members the option of speaking to a Consultation officer over the telephone.

5.13 We received 9 surveys in the post and 3 members of the forum attended our virtual meeting.

5.14 Comments from the surveys included:

Schools budget

"I think schools should get more money because what they do for the children."

"As displayed by the Covid-19, the importance of education in schools, hence if more money can be found, it should."

Fees and charges

"I think charges should stay the same."

"I think disabled people should not pay for car parking."

"Meals on wheels should be lowered, so should adult Social services and homes services. Why hit the vulnerable and the older people?!!!"

Council Tax

"This should be paid by people who can afford it."

"We need to make sure of value for money, going to be tight for the near future, spend wisely."

Reserves

"Money should be held in reserves to be used to keep things going."

"Reserves are just that in case as example it is there to act straight away before trying to obtain funding of WAG or UK Government depending on the emergency."

5.15 The virtual meeting was run by the Consultation Team with help from the Equalities Team and a presentation by the Service Director - Finance and Improvement Services. A short video on the Council's budget and challenges faced was also shown during the meeting and a number of questions then posed to Forum Members.

5.16 Service Priorities

"protect parks, youth provision, highways and access - considering accessible buildings near train stations, regeneration for that reason also, adult social care priorities for the council"

"A lot of members are concerned about accessibility of highways / pavements and streets, the members feel that it's important to know how much of the Council's budget goes towards that."

"culture services only servicing a certain demographic currently..."

5.17 Council Tax. What is your preferred level of Council Tax increase?

“nobody wants Council Tax to increase, so need to convince us but understand the problem. But it has been very hard this year with COVID”

“You have to remember that this year has been really tough on people and they have a lot less money than they had before... people are going to have to claw back next year.”

5.18 Efficiencies.

“Estates are going to be a major player when we get out of Covid.”

5.19 Reserves

“Given climate change reserves are important”

5.20 Council Priorities

“More opportunities for more people will improve people’s mental health.”

“We need to be more accessible in all areas of RCT.”

6. VIRTUAL YOUNG PERSONS ENGAGEMENT

- 6.1 In previous years the Consultation Team have held face to face sessions with secondary schools and young people across the Borough. Due to the restrictions as a result of the pandemic, this year virtual sessions were arranged in place of the on-site / face-to-face visits.
- 6.2 We engaged with 2 secondary school groups and 3 college groups. We held 5 virtual sessions and spoke to pupils from St. John Baptist Church In Wales High School, Aberdare Community School, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Y Pant Secondary School. We also engaged with learners from Coleg Y Cymoedd in Aberdare, Rhondda and Treforest campuses.
- 6.3 The sessions were attended by 2 members of the Consultation Team along with a finance officer. During the sessions the young people were shown a video outlining the budget challenges followed by a short presentation with discussion prompts and questions from the full budget consultation.
- 6.4 The questions were centred around Council Tax levels, Fees and Charges, Council Service Priorities, Efficiencies and the School budget. In total we engaged with 48 young people and a summary of their responses will follow in this section. The sessions were well supported by the teachers and college staff and all young people engaged well with the format.

Council Tax

- 6.5 We asked the groups 'Should council Tax be increased by 2.85% to keep services at current levels or should there be a smaller increase risking losing some services?'
- 6.6 Of the 48 young people we spoke to, 27 were in favour of increasing Council Tax by 2.85% although they were only in favour of this after seeking confirmation that core services would not be affected. The remaining 21 young people fed back that Council Tax should have a lower increase or even remain at the current level, and was based on the view that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on employment locally and therefore people may struggle to afford an increase. There was also the belief that services such as grass cutting had been stopped during the initial lockdown and therefore were not deemed to be essential to justify any increase.

Fees and Charges

- 6.7 We asked the young people whether they felt there should be changes to a range of Council fees and charges, providing the options for fees

and charges to be increased or decreased / frozen. The feedback provided is noted in Table 6.

Table 6: Changes to fees and charges

Service	Increase	Decrease / Freeze	Total
Leisure Centre Pay & Play	0	43	43
Sports Club Playing Fees	6	27	33
Car Parking Charges	14	26	40
Cinema entrance fee	7	41	48
Fines (Dropping litter / dog mess etc.)	47	0	47
Lido Adult entrance fee	46	2	48

(**Note:** Not all participants provided a response for each area).

6.8 Some comments for each area included:

Leisure Centre Pay & Play:

“The fee should be kept as low as possible so that it encourages more people to go.”

“Decrease fees for the short term and then increase.”

“Freeze – access to gyms is quite important for people at the moment with everyone being kept inside.”

“It’s not going to motivate them to join (if fees are raised) and people aren’t exercising as it is.”

Sports Club Playing Fees:

“Fees for sports clubs are high enough at the moment and you might put people off participating if they are raised.”

“There should be a slight increase – the benefit of going to meet your friends outweighs the additional cost.”

“I agree with freezing. I think these facilities should still be accessible to people and due to the impacts of covid, increasing the price would make it less accessible.”

“The costs should depend on the size of the teams. For small teams if the cost goes up it could stop them playing but for bigger teams, they would be able to afford the increase.”

Car Parking Charges:

“Private car parks are overpriced. Council Car Parks should be frozen.”

“A slight increase in the short term, would help to encourage more people to take public transport helping the environment whilst also making more money for the Council.”

*“Cheaper car parking ensures that people park in the correct areas.”
There should be student discount for parking.”*

“If car parks are too expensive in Town Centres it might put people off using the shops there.”

Cinema Entrance Fee:

“No increase – it’s already expensive for young people. If you increase it too much they may not go.”

“Prices should be frozen or lowered. People deserve to go and make use of it.”

Fines:

“Definitely increase these.”

“Definitely higher to deter people. It should be advertised more that you can report people who do this all the time as I didn’t know this.”

“Dog fouling – we need more enforcement.”

“Refresh the signage to remind people of the fines.”

“I don’t think the consequences are really enforced.”

Lido Adult entrance fee:

“Increase as it’s only £2.”

“Increase – as long as it’s kept reasonable so people can afford it then it’s ok.”

“It’s already quite cheap so this could be increased. People would pay more in other areas so this wouldn’t be a bad thing to increase.”

“I’d say the Lido fees right now should be closer to £5.”

Council Service Priorities

- 6.9 We asked all groups to identify which Council services were important to them. We provided a list of service areas and discussions were held

around which ones the groups felt should be a priority and the levels of funding provided.

- 6.10 Apprenticeship schemes were identified as a consistent trend amongst all groups as an area of high importance and where funding is most needed. The groups all felt these schemes played an important part for young people and that sufficient funding would help to see the schemes expanded and widened to cover different service areas. It was identified in one group that 7 young people would have liked the opportunity to apply for an apprenticeship instead of University but held back because they felt there was not a wide variety of apprenticeships available for all academic levels.

Some comments included:

“Apprenticeships are important. More money would give us more of a chance. There’s so many people applying for 1 job these days that we don’t get a chance.”

“We had around 40 young people interested in apprenticeships, but the group felt they were too low level. They felt that they would have wasted 2 years on A levels to go back to a GCSE level.”

- 6.11 Another priority identified across the groups was funding for housing grants / schemes. The ability to be able to access suitable housing options was seen as important by the groups and one that they felt could benefit from increased funding. Feedback included:

“It allows those who may otherwise struggle to be able to afford their own homes which in turn will benefit local economies.”

“It’s important to help people be able to afford to live somewhere.”

“Improving availability could allow many young adults to pursue the career they wanted but may not have had access to otherwise.”

- 6.12 Schools and Education were also a priority by some of the groups. The importance of being able to access a good education with sufficient resources was the main reason for this being a priority for young people. Feedback included:

“Schools are a hub both for children and adults alike. It is the focal point for after school clubs as well as being a place of education therefore its budget should definitely be protected or increased.”

“Schools experience is an extremely influential part of a child’s life and new resources are always needed due to the rapid advancements in technology and teaching methods.”

- 6.13 Public Health was also identified by some of the young people as being a priority service area. Given the impacts of the global pandemic in 2020

young people felt that this required adequate funding to be able to manage the ongoing impacts of Covid-19. Feedback included:

“Public health is also very important, and its money should be increased because in the current climate we really need to put as much of our resources into finding the best way to manage Covid in our communities.”

“It is extremely important to fund these services especially during these times when there is an existing strain on public health services.”

- 6.14 Music services emerged as a strong priority amongst one group with the agreement that the service would benefit from more funding. Members of the group discussed their own personal experience of using the Music service and how they had noticed a decrease in the availability since joining secondary school. Feedback from this group included:

“If there’s more support, more people might want to go down that route. I enjoyed it in Primary School.”

“Not enough funding for this. There should be a wider range of music in Secondary School. There are more options in Primary school than Secondary.”

“This should be protected – it provides children with skills they may use in the future.”

- 6.15 The remaining service areas also received individual comments throughout the sessions which have been noted below:

Library and Adult Learning

“Most learning courses for adults can be done online.”

“Although these are important, a lot of the resources used, and more are accessible on the internet.”

“The advertising from the Council isn’t great, people like my grandparents wouldn’t know about them.”

Waste

“I have chosen waste and recycling services to be protected because they are the services that do not get enough credit. If they were given extra money it would mean that people would be more aware of the necessary work they do, which we don’t really notice.”

Adult Social Care

“Adult social care – similarly to Children’s social care, there is a high demand for adult social care due to the ageing population.”

Roads and Transport Services

“It is important to provide efficient and accessible transport links as a tremendous amount of the local economy is affected by the viability of transport.”

Children’s Social Care

“There is an increasing demand for children’s social services and it is in great need of funding.”

Leisure Centres

“Vital part of the community and encourages good health and well – being.”

Parks and Play Areas

“During these times parks may not be in need of a lot of funding as it is unlikely that they are being used often due to the social distancing measures.”

Cultural, tourism and heritage services

“Greatly benefits the economy.”

Regeneration and supporting people out of work

“Has the potential to significantly decrease unemployment rates.”

Efficiencies

6.16 We discussed the requirement for the Council to aim to be as efficient as possible and asked for the groups’ views on this approach and if they had any ideas of ways in which the Council could become more efficient. The groups all felt that looking for ways to become more efficient was a useful task and the changes to the way in which Council offices are run, particularly during the pandemic, were discussed as a way of embracing working digitally and remotely. Some questions were raised on the process of identifying efficiencies amongst service areas and whether there could be a benefit to having an outside perspective.

6.17 Feedback included:

“Being efficient is probably more important now because everyone is being forced to work so differently. I think more tech work would be a great way to improve efficiency.”

“Would it be better to employ specific people to look at efficiencies in the Council from the outside through a fresh pair of eyes?”

“Highways/Road repairs can be unnecessary. They take a long time and seem a waste of money.”

“Digitalisation – working from home frees up building costs, utility costs. There could be a building review and centralisation of services.”

“Working from home is efficient but is it as efficient as being in the office as people are missing bouncing ideas off each other.”

Schools Budget

6.18 When asked whether the groups agreed with the Council’s approach to protect and prioritise the Schools budget, 33 young people agreed with this. Of those that agreed, there was agreement that education is an important service area for young people and is something that should continue to receive adequate funding. The groups acknowledged that the increased budget could be used to provide better buildings and school equipment to give learners the best experience possible.

6.19 Feedback included:

“Increasing or even freezing the budget gives children the best education they can have.”

“Important to keep up to date with technology and IT facilities.”

“I think schools should be a priority.”

“Even though it has been maintained, we feel it should have been increased.”



PHASE 1 BUDGET CONSULTATION (2021/22)

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee held on Monday,
16 November 2020 at 5.00 pm.

County Borough Councillors - Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor M Powell (Chair)

Councillor G Thomas	Councillor S Bradwick
Councillor R Yeo	Councillor J Williams
Councillor T Williams	Councillor J Cullwick
Councillor G Caple	Councillor A Fox

Officers in attendance:-

Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services
Mr A Wilkins – Director of Legal Services
Mr C Davies – Corporate Policy and Consultation Manager
Mrs S Handy – Members' Researcher and Scrutiny Officer
Mrs C Hendy – Senior Democratic Services Officer

County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor M Adams – Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Others in attendance:-

Mr Fish – Voting Parent / Governor Representative

13 Welcome

The Chair welcomed Members to the second virtual meeting of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee for the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

14 Apologies

Apologies of absence were received from County Borough Councillor S. Rees-Owen, W. Owen and J. Edwards.

15 Declaration of Interest

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

16 Minutes

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 19th October 2020 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

Extract from the minutes

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, the Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services provided Members with an overview of the 2021/22 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation and updated Committee on the following areas:

- General Approach for 2021/22
- Consultation
 - Council Budget 2021/22
 - The Council's Priorities
 - Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Following the update, the Service Director indicated that the overview intended to assist Members in formulating their responses to a number of questions to be posed to the Committee, in line with its Terms of Reference and as a consultee as part of the 2021/22 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation process.

The Service Director sought feedback from the Committee on a number of areas and the views of Members are noted below.

- **Schools Budget**

In respect of school budgets, Committee Members agreed that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in schools.

- **Fees and Charges**

Councillor Thomas indicated that providing feedback is more difficult due to there being no information comparing the UK Consumer Prices (CPI) Index rate and a specific rate for Rhondda Cynon Taf. The Service Director fed back that to provide further context, the key funding sources to fund Council Services were Welsh Government funding and Council Tax, with fees and charges also providing an important contribution to the overall cost of service delivery.

Councillor Cullwick fed back that he felt that the increases set out in Table 6.1 of the Medium Term Financial Plan 2020/21 to 2023/24 seemed very sensible.

Discussions ensued and Councillor Caple raised a query in respect of fixed penalty notices for envirocrimes such as fly tipping and expressed his view that the public would welcome an increase higher than the CPI rate. The Service Director advised Members that the feedback would be noted and added that for certain areas there may be a maximise level at which a fixed penalty notice can be set at. Councillor Bradwick advised that as Chair of the

Public Service Delivery and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee he believed this to be correct and that there are 'caps' in place in terms of the level of fixed penalty notice that can be charged for specific envirocrimes. Councillor Bradwick also fed back his view that where permissible, fixed penalty notice charges should be increased.

The Chair emphasised that if Members would like to acquire further information on this area, they should contact the appropriate Service Director.

The Chair sought further information in respect of the Pontypridd Lido and queried whether the current budget modelling includes a proposed increase in fee for the use of pool equipment by children such as floats, noting that children have free entrance to the Lido. The Chair also enquired whether this approach had been applied to cinema entrance fees at the Park and Dare and Coliseum theatres. The Service Director fed back that the current budget modelling position assumes a 1.7% uplift on fees and charges for 2021/22, including the charges for the use of pool equipment at the Pontypridd Lido and all chargeable services provided at the Parc and Dare and Coliseum theatres including cinema entrance fees. The Chair fed back that he would support a nil increase in the charge for the use of pool equipment at the Lido and advised that he would put a list together of different areas and send his views to the Service Director directly for consideration as part of the consultation process.

The Director for Legal Services advised the Committee that Members can put forward their own comments and that the comments will be noted as part of the consultation process.

- **Council Service Priorities**

Members were provided with a list of Council services and were asked which services should be protected and prioritised for additional resources in 2021/22. Committee Members were of the view that all services listed in the slide should be protected.

- **Council Tax**

Members were provided with four options in respect of Council Tax increases for 2021/22. Councillor Thomas and Councillor Bradwick were of the view that the preferred option should be 2.85% and Councillor Thomas noted that this should be in the context of maintaining frontline services at their current levels.

Discussions ensued and Mr Fish, the Voting parent/Governor Representative, noted that there is an increased demand for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) due to changes in household personal circumstances and queried how many people would be brought into the CTRS by a 2.85% increase in Council Tax. The Service Director advised Members that eligibility for the CTRS is based on the individual's income levels and for the first 3 months of the current year for example eligible applications had increased by over 1,000. The Service Director added that additional CTRS costs are being funded by Welsh Government, via Covid-19 funding made available, with the Council forecasting full year increased costs of £1.2M.

Discussions continued and Councillor Yeo fed back his agreement with the current proposed level, and noted that the public should be made aware of how the budget is set for the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales and also for elected Members to be informed of this. Councillor Yeo added that in respect of efficiency savings, it was the Councillor's opinion that there will be a continued requirement for the Council to deliver efficiency savings unless grant funding from the UK Government is increased. The Corporate Policy & Engagement Manager informed Members that he would make enquiries and provide feedback to Members in respect of the budget setting arrangements for the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales.

Councillor Thomas emphasised that it will be important appropriate context is provided to the general public as part of the consultation process, such as noting the potential impact if a lower Council Tax increase is agreed. The Service Director advised Members a video will be played at public engagement events setting out key information and Finance Officers will be present to provide additional details as required.

- **Efficiencies**

Mr Fish, the Voting Parent/Governor Representative noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic more Local Government employees are currently working from home and queried whether accommodation savings are being factored into the process in terms of efficiency savings. The Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services informed Members that more efficient use of the Council's accommodation is an area being progressed, taking into account the transformation that Council services have introduced during the pandemic. The Service Director added that the delivery of accommodation related budget savings will be an on-going programme of work as opportunities are identified and implemented.

Discussions continued and Councillor Yeo expressed his view that technology advancements will also drive and shape service delivery, and provide opportunities to become more efficient, and emphasised that the continued delivery of efficiency savings will be key in helping the Council to maintain frontline services.

In respect of accommodation savings, the Chair noted that whilst efficiency saving opportunities will arise from staff working from home, this will likely to be over the medium term rather than short term, and reinforced the need for all Council services to continue to become more efficient.

Councillor Cullwick queried whether there was potential for efficiency savings through the use of electric vehicles. The Service Director fed back that the Council is currently trialling the use of electric vehicles to assess 'fit for purpose' and is committed to continuing to explore this area to support the Council's carbon reduction ambitions and at the same time consider the financial implications.

Discussions ensued and Councillor Williams expressed her view that it will not always be possible to deliver the same quality of services at the same time as delivering more efficient services. In respect of home working,

Councillor Williams emphasised that there are positives of attending and working in an office environment and that it was important for staff well-being that there is an appropriate balance between home and office working in the future.

- **Council Reserves**

Councillor Yeo stated his view that the Council should continue with the strategy of keeping reserves and emphasised their importance during the unprecedented Storm Dennis adverse weather event in February 2020. Councillor Bradwick also noted his agreement. Councillor Thomas also agreed and emphasised the importance for the Council's reserves to be replenished going forward.

- **Council Priorities / Council Investment Priorities**

The Service Director informed Members that the Council focuses on five key areas to maximise resources and deliver improved services, these being Digitalisation; Commercialism; Early Intervention; Independence; and, Efficient and Effective Organisation.

Members agreed that the Council should continue to focus on these five areas going forward.

The Service Director then indicated that despite reductions to public sector funding, the Council's prudent approach to financial management has ensured significant investment can still take place in priority areas. The Service Director set out key areas for investment and requested Members' feedback in terms of should the Council continue to invest in these areas. Members fed back their support for the Council to continue to invest in the areas listed in the presentation.

- **Corporate Plan**

Members fed back that they were in agreement with the Vision, Purpose and priorities of the Council's Corporate Plan.

- **Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

- **Extended Payments:**

Committee Members agreed that 4 weeks was a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work. The Chair requested Council Tax information by Community Area and the Service Director indicated that he would request this from the service and provide feedback.

- **Disregard War Disablement Pensions/War Widow's Pensions income**

Members noted their agreement that it is reasonable for the Council to continue to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to the CTR Scheme.

- **Backdating Claims**

Members agreed that 6 months is a reasonable period to backdate claims for working age and pensioners.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED** that the views of Members as outlined above be fed into the consultation process.

**SCHOOL BUDGET FORUM
(DRAFT MINUTES - SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY THE SCHOOL BUDGET
FORUM)**

Minutes of the meeting of the School Budget Forum held on Monday, 30 November 2020 at 2.00 pm (via a Virtual meeting).

EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES

<p>PRESENT</p>	<p>Councillor C Leyshon (Vice-Chair) Councillor M Webber Councillor R Lewis</p> <p>Mr R Jones – Treorchy Comprehensive School Mr P Morgan, Glynhafod Juniors / Cwmaman Infants Ms. L. Bailey, Tonysguboriau Primary Ms K Retallick, Ysgol Nantgwyn Mr S Roberts, Maesybryn Primary Mr D Mogford, Maesgwyn Mr A Roberts, Parc Lewis Primary Ms B Cheetham, Y Pant Comprehensive</p> <p>Ms C Jones Mr M Cleverley Ms A Winter – Central South Consortium</p>
<p>IN ATTENDANCE</p>	<p>Mr C Bradshaw Ms G Davies Mr P Griffiths Ms C Edwards Ms S Davies</p>
<p>APOLOGIES</p>	<p>Councillor J Rosser (Chair) Councillor A Morgan Councillor M Norris</p> <p>Mr R Evans – Y Pant Mr D Davies, YGG Aberdar Mr D Jenkins, Ysgol Ty Coch Ms S Mitchell, St John the Baptist School Mr C Coole, Darran Park Primary Ms J Rees, Cwmlai Primary Ms E Beasley - Ysgol Nantgwyn Ms H Nicholas – Tonyrefail Community School</p>

No	Discussion / Action	Action	By Who
8.	<p>BUDGET CONSULTATION 2021/22 (INCLUDING MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN UPDATE)</p> <p>With the aid of a PowerPoint Presentation the Service Director – Finance and Improvement Services provided Members with a summary update in respect of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2020/21 to 2023/24 (MTFP) and Phase 1 of the Budget Consultation 2021/22.</p> <p>During his overview of the MTFP Members were provided with information on the Council's 2020/21 Revenue Budget and financial position, and an outlook over the next 3 years, as set out in the MTFP. The Service Director provided specific updates from the MTFP that included assumptions around Welsh Government Settlement levels; Council Tax; Schools; forecasted 'inescapable' and 'risk' budget pressures, fees and charges and inflation; Reserves; and overall forecasted spend requirements and resource availability. With specific regard to Schools, the Service Director advised that the Schools Budget for 2020/21 equated to £161.6M (over 31% of the Council's total budget) and highlighted the long term commitment of the Council to support schools and recognizing that there has been a requirement for local efficiency planning at an individual school level over a number of years.</p> <p>The Service Director went on to provide Forum Members with a series of PowerPoint slides covering the Budget Consultation 2021/22 arrangements, indicating that it is a 2 phase process, adopts a 'digital by default' approach due to Covid-19 and provides alternate means for those with reduced or no access to the internet.</p> <p>The Service Director proceeded to ask Forum Members questions contained within the budget consultation and Members were reminded that their feedback would be incorporated into a Phase 1 Budget Consultation report, alongside the feedback received from all other stakeholders, and would be considered by Cabinet as part of it</p>	Noted	PG

developing a proposed Revenue Budget Strategy for the 2021/22 financial year. Forum Members were requested to provide feedback on the following questions.

School Budget

Do you agree that the Council should provide sufficient resources to fully cover increased pay and non-pay cost pressures in our schools?

- Members agreed that the Council should continue to provide sufficient resources, referencing the extra pressure put on schools over the last 8 months due to the Covid 19 pandemic with such pressures continuing into the future. Members referenced the extra support provided through hybrid learning approaches and the essential support being provided by schools in respect of mental health awareness and support, notwithstanding the staffing resource implications and pressures due to Covid itself.
- Members commented on the risk teachers were experiencing everyday (and the risk this presented for their own families) on the frontline due to the pandemic, continuing to keep children's education and wellbeing a priority and commented that in light of this any national pay freeze for teachers would be scandalous.

Fees & Charges

What are your views on fees and charges levels for next year for the following areas (*as outlined within the presentation*) plus any other areas?

- Forum Members were happy with the current position in respect of Fees & Charges.

Council Service Priorities

The Council provides a wide range of important services – which do you think should be most protected and prioritised for additional resources in 2021/22?

- Forum Members were content with the priorities outlined within the presentation slide.

Council Tax

What would be your preferred level of Council Tax increase for next year?

- Some Forum Members commented that any increase would cause financial difficulties for some families and other Forum Members fed back support for the proposed 2.85% increase.

Efficiencies

Do you think this is a good strategy?

- Forum Members commented that all schools were continually trying to deliver efficiency savings although it was noted that schools were now needing to deliver even more during the pandemic, delivering services usually taken forward via other services with specific reference to wellbeing services.

(N.B. Officers commented on the additional measures provided by the Council to assist and support the emotional and wellbeing agenda of pupils through additional funding of family engagement officers, specific grant funding and significant investment for social, emotional and behavioural support)

Council Reserves.

Do you think the Council should continue with such a strategy?

- The Forum agreed that the Council should continue with its strategy in respect of Reserves.

General Comments

- Elected Members of the Forum took the opportunity to place on record their thanks to all schools and their staff who have gone above and beyond and have continued to deliver for the benefit of the young people of RCT in very difficult and unprecedented times. Members commented on the inspiring support being provided to pupils in all aspects of education and wellbeing. The Members also spoke of the importance of the feedback provided by the Forum as part of the budget consultation process and the Council's on-going commitment to

support young people across the County Borough.

- Forum Members commented on the genuine pressures placed on schools and again spoke of the support needed to assist them to deliver. Members recognised and appreciated the support already being provided by the Council, at the same time as recognising the on-going challenging environment schools are operating within, and the Forum welcomed working further with the Council to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Part II – Council Priorities

Council Priorities

Do you think that the Council should focus on the 5 key areas of digitisation, commercialisation, early intervention and prevention, independence and efficient and effective organisation to maximise resources and deliver improved services?

- Forum Members agreed that the Council should focus on these areas.

Council Investment Priorities

Do you think the Council should invest in the priorities set out?

- One Forum Member commented on the 21st Century Schools priority and spoke of the huge benefit this priority has for pupils, staff and the whole community.
- The Flood alleviation scheme area was also commented upon as an important investment priority.

Corporate Plan

Do you agree with the Council's Vision and Purpose?

- Forum Members agreed with the Vision and purpose.

Do you agree with the Council's Corporate Plan priorities of People, Places and Prosperity?

- One Forum Member commented on the importance of partnership working

between children's services and schools and the continual progress that needs to be delivered upon.

Part III - Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Extended Payments - Do you think that 4 weeks is a reasonable period to continue paying Council Tax Reduction when someone returns to work?

- Forum Members agreed that 4 weeks was a reasonable period.

Disregard War Disablement Pensions/War Widow's Pensions income

- Forum Members felt it was reasonable for the Council to continue to totally exclude War Disablement and War Widow's Pensions income when assessing entitlement to CTR Scheme.

Back dating Claims - Do you think that 6 months is a reasonable period to backdate claims for working age and pensioners?

- Forum Members were content that 6 months was a reasonable time period.

General Comments

- Forum Members commented that they appreciated the support (financial and non-financial) provided by the Council.

The Service Director thanked all Members for their comments and reiterated that these would be included within the Phase 1 Consultation report presented to Cabinet.

Following discussion, Members **RESOLVED** to note the 2021/22 Budget Consultation.