

EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 21ST DECEMBER, 2017

PRESENT: Councillor D. Price [Chair]

Councillors:

L.R. Bowen, K.V. Broom, I.W. Davies, B.W. Jones, D. Jones, G.R. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis, E.M.J.G. Schiavone, B. Thomas, E.G. Thomas and D.T. Williams

Mrs V. Kenny – Roman Catholic Church Representative
Mrs J. Voyle-Williams – Church in Wales Representative
Mrs K. Hill – Parent Governor [Dinefwr Area]

Also in attendance:

Councillor G. Davies, Executive Board Member for Education & Children

The following Officers were in attendance:

Mr G. Morgans	-	Director of Education & Children's Services
Mr C. Moore	-	Director of Corporate Services
Mr A. Morgan	-	Head of Education Services
Mr A. Rees	-	Head of Curriculum & Wellbeing
Mr S. Smith	-	Head of Children's Services
Mr D. Astins	-	Strategic Development Manager
Mr S. Davies	-	Modernisation Services Manager
Ms S. Nolan	-	Group Accountant
Mrs M. Evans Thomas	-	Principal Democratic Services Officer

Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen : 10.00 a.m. - 12.45 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs Alex Pickles, Parent Governor Member. The Chair advised the Committee that Mrs Emma Heyes, also a Parent Governor Member, had recently resigned as a member of the Committee. He added that the terms of office of all three Parent Governor Members expired on 31st March, 2018 and the recruitment process would begin in January 2018.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

3. DECLARATIONS OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of party whips.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

5. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2018/19-2020/21

The Committee considered the Revenue Budget Strategy 2018/19 to 2020/21 which had been endorsed for consultation by the Executive Board at its meeting held on 27th November, 2017.

The report provided members with the current view of the revenue budget for 2018/19 together with indicative figures for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 financial years. The report was based on officers' projections of spending need and took account of the provisional settlement announced by Welsh Government on 10th October, 2017 and reflected the current departmental submissions for savings proposals.

The Director of Corporate Services advised the Committee that the final settlement had been announced the day before and an additional £1.4m had been allocated to Carmarthenshire.

The Committee considered the following detailed budget information relevant to its remit which was appended to the report:-

- **Appendix A(i)** – Efficiency summary for the Education & Children Department;
- **Appendix A(ii)** – Growth Pressures summary for the Education & Children Department;
- **Appendix B** – Budget extracts for the Education & Children Department;
- **Appendix C** – Charging Digest for the Education & Children Department.

In summary, the budget proposals assumed full delivery of all of the £25.6m savings proposals, together with the identification and delivery of the shortfall in savings proposals of £0.198m in 2018/19, £2.4m in 2019/20 and £2.7m in 2020/21. Further cost reductions would need to be identified to deliver a balanced budget in each of the three years.

The current budget proposals assumed a Council Tax increase in line with the original MTFP of 4.12% in 2018/19, 3.88% in 2019/20 and 5.00% in 2020/21. A 1% movement in the Council Tax rises equated to +/- £820k.

The following observations/questions were raised on the report:-

- Concern was expressed over the proposed reduction in respite care and the effect on parents of children requiring respite. The importance was stressed of consulting with service users regarding such proposals. The Head of Children's Services assured the Committee that some consultation had already been undertaken in this regard and officers will continue to engage with service users as the proposals move forward. He explained that there was no intention to suddenly end respite for families and that it was more to do with looking to see if the service can be provided in a different, better way;
- Reference was made to the proposed increase in the price of school meals and officers were asked how Carmarthenshire compares with other Local Authorities with regard to both price and take-up. The Strategic Development Manager advised the Committee that Carmarthenshire is currently one of the highest charging Authorities. He explained that it was

difficult to get accurate take-up figures from other Local Authorities, however, Carmarthenshire is currently running at around 58%-60%;

- Concern was expressed at the proposed increase in the price of school meals as the cost has increased over and above inflation for the past three years and families with 2 or 3 children have major difficulty in funding this. The Strategic Development Manager explained that if the price is not increased then the money will have to be found from elsewhere;
- Officers were asked how many children within the county qualify for free school meals but have not applied for them and whether it would be possible to share good practice from a school with a high take up of free school meals. The Strategic Development Manager advised that it was not possible to get a take up figure, however, there are families who are eligible for free school meals but do not apply. Officers were not permitted to approach these families. Free school meals are promoted by way of letter and via social media. He added that he would be happy to meet with members to discuss ways of improving the take-up whilst also removing the stigma;
- Officers were asked why the £1.7m school reserves held in April 2017 are projected to become minus figures for the next two years. The Director of Corporate Services explained that when forecasting reserves there is a hidden picture as some schools are in deficit and some have a surplus. £1.7m is the complete figure, however, there are 33 schools in deficit and that is why the figures goes into a minus. The Director of Education & Children added that school surpluses have reduced from £5m a few years ago to around £1m as school are having to use their surplus to prop up their budget.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 5.1 That the 2018/19-2020/21 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received;**
- 5.2 That, whilst noting the proposals for the delivery of efficiency savings for the Education & Children Department, as detailed in Appendix A(i) to the report, the Committee's concerns regarding any reduction in respite care provision be relayed to the Executive Board;**
- 5.3 That the Charging Digest for the Education & Children Department, as detailed in Appendix C to the report, be endorsed.**

6. EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES DEPARTMENTAL DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2018/19-2021

The Committee considered the Education & Children Departmental Draft Business Plan 2018/19-2021 which detailed the department's aims and objectives for 2018-21.

The following observations/questions were raised on the report:-

- Officers were asked how teachers share best practice. The Director of Education & Children explained that when examination results are received in August they are analysed and officers meet with the schools who have made the most improvement to discuss how they dealt with the challenge;

- Asked if more can be done to promote the use of the Welsh language, the Director of Education & Children referred to the Authority's Welsh Language Strategy and its aim to be able to provide all services through the Welsh language. All staff are offered the opportunity to learn Welsh. With regard to schools, a pilot project will commence in Llanelli in 2018 whereby school staff will be offered the opportunity to be released from school to learn Welsh. The Head of Education Services informed the Committee that the department bid for money from the Welsh Government to employ three teachers to provide supply cover but also to promote the Welsh language in a cluster of Llanelli schools;
- Asked how the business plan is created and how consultation is undertaken, the Director of Education & Children explained that his Heads of Service and Managers prepare the business plan following engagement with various divisions who create their priorities. Consultation is undertaken via the School Strategy and Budget Forum which includes primary and secondary school headteachers;
- With regard to the continued reduction in the number of looked after children over the last five years, officers were asked if the level had reached a natural plateau. The Head of Children's Services explained that the numbers have levelled off slightly, however, as a result of actions being implemented it was hoped to reduce the figure further to 150 over the next couple of years;
- Reference was made to the difficulty being experienced with the recruitment and retention of foster carers and officers were asked what is being done on a national level to counteract this. The Head of Children's Services explained that the Authority pays significantly less to foster carers than neighbouring Authorities, however, it was hoped to match some of these. The Welsh Government sets a basic minimum level of payment, however, it cannot control additional payments made by Local Authorities e.g. enhancements.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the Education & Children Departmental Draft Business Plan 2018/19 – 2021 be received.

7. BEHAVIOUR SERVICE REVIEW

The Committee considered a report detailing the proposed remodelling of Carmarthenshire's Behaviour Support Services.

The Authority's Behaviour Support Services were developed in the mid-2000s and, in light of recent concerns, it was considered timely to review our current practices. This coincides with a departmental realignment with Behaviour Support Services transferring to the Curriculum and Wellbeing portfolio to dovetail curriculum, learner support and wellbeing. This has enabled a holistic review of Behaviour Support Services to be undertaken.

The following question was asked on the report:-

- Reference was made to the fact that all schools should have a behaviour policy in place and officers were asked if there is a model policy throughout the county. The Director of Education & Children confirmed that every school should have a behaviour policy which should be developed in partnership with pupils, staff, Governors and parents to suit their individual

needs and requirements. A template can be provided but should be adapted to meet local needs as required.

RESOLVED that the proposals for the remodelling of Carmarthenshire's Behaviour Support Services be noted.

8. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee received an explanation for the non-submission of the following scrutiny report which was scheduled to be considered at today's meeting:-

- 5 Year Capital Budget Consultation

RESOLVED that the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

9. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Chair advised the Committee that a report on the establishment of a Task and Finish Group would also be included on the agenda for the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items, to include a report on the establishment of a Task and Finish Group, to be considered at the next scheduled meeting to be held on Thursday, 25th January, 2018 be noted.

CHAIR

DATE