

COUNCILLORS' QUESTIONS

PART A – SUPPLEMENTARIES

1.	<p>Councillors E W Fitzgerald, D G Sullivan, L James, S M Jones, K M Marsh, I M Richard & G D Walker.</p> <p>Could the Leader state the cost of producing the Budget agenda, including all the additional papers that were sent to each Councillor?</p> <p>Response by The Leader</p> <p>The Extraordinary Meeting of Council held on 24 February 2015 contained all of the reports and supplementary papers required for Councillors to make an informed decision relating to the Council's budget. This information ran to approximately 669 sides of A4 paper.</p> <p>The Council Summons relating to the budget included:</p> <p>Agenda Items 4, 5 and 6 (224 sides of A4 paper) Statement of Accounts 2012-2013 (222 sides of A4 paper); Statement of Accounts 2013-2014 (223 sides of A4 paper).</p> <p>The DesignPrint printing charge is 3p per click. A click is the cost of printing per side of paper. This cost includes all overheads (machine rental, staff, building etc) related to the printing and binding of the document.</p> <p>The cost of printing the budget element of the Council Summons was:</p> <p>Per Councillor (669 sides x 3p) = £20.07.</p> <p>For all 72 Councillors (£20.07 x 72) = £1,445.04.</p> <p>Councillors will also be aware of the ongoing channel shift within this Authority whereby Councillors are encouraged to modernise the way in which they work. To this end the Councillors ICT Allowance allows flexibility for a Councillor to manage their ICT needs directly. Training is freely available to Councillors to assist them in this modernisation process. Costs are being reduced due to the greater use of web links within reports and the associated reduction in the needs for paper copies.</p>
2.	<p>Councillors A M Day, C A Holley & L G Thomas</p> <p>In the Council Budget meeting on 24 February, the Cabinet Member for education said that she was making a change to the policy on disposal of surplus school land. She said that priority will be given to disposing of 'easily accessible, high value assets'. Can the Cabinet Member tell Council what she means by this with reference to some examples of what she means by 'easily accessible, high value assets'?</p>

Response by Cabinet Member for Education

In November 2011, the former Lib Dem led Administration informed the WG that the match funding for the 21st Century Schools Programme of £25m was anticipated from the capital receipts realised through the disposal of surplus educational assets. In addition, WG was informed that the process of marketing the sites to realise the capital receipts was underway.

To date, about 1.8% of the target receipts have been obtained. The estimated receipts from the present land sale list represents, at best 15% of what is required. One question which therefore arises is to what extent this represents a realistic method of match funding the contribution from the Welsh Government.

To enable the Council to deliver its priorities across all services, it has to take a strategic approach to asset management which reflects 'joined up thinking' rather than piecemeal sales that may prevent it from delivering the Schools Programme.

The review of the policy will consider all assets across the County, in addition to the limited land identified in the former Administration's desk top exercise. This Labour led Council is bringing to market high value sites with existing access arrangements.

3. **Councillors E W Fitzgerald, D G Sullivan, L James, S M Jones, K M Marsh, I M Richard & G D Walker.**

In view of the revelations in Rochdale, Rotherham and Oxford is the Leader able to assure Council and the public that there is no evidence that grooming of young girls is taking place in Swansea?

Response of The Leader

At the moment, there is no evidence that there is widespread grooming of young girls or boys in Swansea but we probably need to acknowledge that sometimes, young people in Swansea are sexually exploited, sometimes they are sexually abused and that sometimes this may involve the grooming of children and young people.

The Western Bay Safeguarding Board and the City and County of Swansea have recognised tackling child sexual exploitation as a strategic priority in children's safeguarding since 2013. Swansea Children Services has had policies and procedures in place as part of compliance with the all Wales child protection procedures for a number of years prior to this. As part of our multi agency safeguarding practice we have identified a number of young people either at risk of or who have been sexually exploited and have worked with the police, other professionals and families to put in place safety plans for those children and taken steps to disrupt criminal activity and prosecute perpetrators.

Sadly, sexual exploitation does happen in Swansea as elsewhere, however to date there has been no evidence of organised sexual exploitation via criminal gangs or groups of individuals.

There is no room for complacency in this regard and the Council continues to play a full part in the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements that are in place to ensure that children and young people are protected from all forms of abuse.

We held a conference on Child Sexual Exploitation in the Liberty stadium last October. It was attended by nearly 300 people from a wide-range of organisations across Swansea. The public sector, third sector & private sector group were all represented.

Work in schools is also invaluable. Children and Young People need to feel that they are taken seriously, listened to & that something will be done if they tell a trusted adult about an abuser.

Councillors have an important role as 'eyes and ears' in communities. Our social workers have been keenly aware of this issue for some time in Swansea but we **all** must be ever-vigilant and work with partners to ensure that our children and young people are kept safe.

4. Councillors M H Jones, J W Jones & J Newbury

In the Report on the Budget to Council on 24 February, reference was made in the section on Staffing Implications to numbers of ER/VR, Posts at Risk, etc. However, the report stated that the figures excluded school based staff. Can the Cabinet Member for Education tell Council how many teaching and non-teaching posts are likely to be made redundant, and can she indicate how many of these will be voluntary and how many will be compulsory?

Response by the Cabinet Member for Education

It is difficult to give exact numbers of posts at risk at this point in time as schools are still awaiting their indicative budget. However, based on a 5% proposed cut and initial information from Head Teachers predictions equate to potentially 1 or 2 staff redundancies from each school.

The predictions above would give total staff redundancies between 92 and 184. It should be noted, however, to date, we have received a number of applications for ER, 38 in total which would potentially reduce the estimated number of potential redundancies between 54 and 146.

Recent conversations with Governing Bodies indicate that these figures may be reduced further depending on school reserves and the ability to release funds towards setting a balanced budget.

It again is difficult at this early stage to indicate how many would be voluntary or compulsory basis.

5.	<p>Councillors E W Fitzgerald, D G Sullivan, L James, S M Jones, K M Marsh, I M Richard & G D Walker.</p> <p>The Leader has indicated that some of the Council's budget will be devolved to Councillors for them to determine best use within their wards. Will there also be an option for Members to employ local contractors to deliver a chosen project rather than Council staff?</p> <p>Response of The Leader</p> <p>The Council has an existing scheme entitled "Ward Members Environmental Improvement Budgets" whereby a total of £13,000 has been allocated to each Ward Member for the current 5 year term.</p> <p>Consideration is being given to extend this scheme in terms of increasing the amounts delegated and potentially the range of things that the money can be spent on. A new proposed scheme is currently being developed and the options will be progressed via Cabinet and following the appropriate consultation.</p>
6.	<p>Councillors M H Jones, C A Holley, P M Meara</p> <p>Will the Leader tell Council the total cost of moving the Councillors and support staff from the Civic centre to the Guildhall?</p> <p>Response by The Leader</p> <p>Final costs for the relocation including works to the Guildhall Chamber are still being established but when compared with the costs for reconfiguring the Council Chamber at the Civic Centre, there is an overall estimated saving of circa £200,000.</p> <p>The moves are also aligned to the future proposed disposal of the Civic Centre with further significant savings expected in line with the Council Accommodation Strategy.</p>
7.	<p>Councillors J W Jones, P M Black, L G Thomas</p> <p>As the focus is on regenerating the City Centre will the Cabinet Member inform Council what he is intending to do to protect the viability of the City Centre considering the fact that there are a number of retail outlets closing at Parc Fforestfach?</p> <p>Response by the Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development and Regeneration</p> <p>We are working on a new Local Development Plan which will reinforce the established clear policy framework set out in the Unitary Development Plan and Supplementary Planning Guidance which sets out the priority afforded to the City Centre Retail Core area and to resist any further development that would be prejudicial to the retail core.</p>

	<p>We are also reviewing the City Centre Strategic Framework which is currently out for consultation and this will provide further policy supporting the City Centre.</p> <p>In addition we have marketed the St Davids city centre regeneration opportunity, held launches in London and Swansea which attracted over 200 people which will end in the selection of a preferred developer to take forward the regeneration of the city centre.</p>
8.	<p>Councillors E W Fitzgerald, D G Sullivan, L James, S M Jones, K M Marsh, I M Richard & G D Walker.</p> <p>Could the Leader or Cabinet Member explain why the number of residential units allocated for the Vetch site fell from 120 in the Original Masterplan to only 50 in the Revised Masterplan?</p> <p>Response of The Leader/ Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development and Regeneration</p> <p>The rationale for reviewing the Original Masterplan was set out in a report approved by Cabinet on 11th February 2014. In summary the aspirations of the original Masterplan were deemed by Officers to be undeliverable as evidenced by a previous marketing process that did not produce any acceptable bids. In addition the temporary green space created since the demolition including the 'Vetch Veg' has been welcomed by the local community in an area where it is acknowledged through an Open Space Assessment carried out to inform the LDP process that provision of Open Space in the Castle Ward is deficient. A community consultation process has since been carried out in respect of the reviewed Masterplan and the revised Masterplan proposals were broadly supported by respondents although there was an element of respondents who wanted no development at the site. Cabinet is to consider a report on 17th March 2015 recommending the endorsement of the Vetch Field Masterplan Review and in order that it can be referred to the Planning Committee for adoption as Supplementary Planning Guidance.</p>
9.	<p>Councillors J W Jones, C A Holley & M H Jones</p> <p>Considering the fact that Swansea has been one of the poorest areas of the UK what progress has the Cabinet Member made in attracting jobs to the area which in turn will increase the spending power of its residents?</p> <p>Response by the Cabinet Member for Transformation and Performance</p> <p>The economic downturn suppressed inward investment activity for a long while during which time we concentrated on creating employment through maximising the value of our procurement and regeneration activity and the capacity of our own business community. As the economic climate is now recovering we are reinvigorating our approach across all activity.</p>

	<p>Before the closure of the Workways project in December 2014 nearly 3300 Swansea residents, many of whom were categorised as economically inactive had participated in the scheme that was designed to increase the employability and skills of those farthest away from the job market. Of those participants, over 1000 left the project to move into employment.</p> <p>This year with Beyond Bricks & Mortar we are currently working with 15 regeneration projects with some 29 trainees (13 of who are apprentices) currently on placement, receiving training and work experience as a direct result of our intervention. The training that people are receiving has been in brickwork, plumbing, electrical, administration and even supervisory and technical roles. Beyond Bricks & Mortar is also working with other public sector organisations including our higher and further education establishments to ensure that community benefits are achieved in their projects including employment opportunities for the long term unemployed and the economically inactive.</p> <p>We are working with the Swansea Bay City Region and have produced and adopted a regional strategy that will guide future investments. In particular, we will be seeking investment in knowledge and innovation sectors through close collaboration with our universities and Welsh Government. We will also be working closely with UKT&I to develop sector propositions that they can present to future foreign investors demonstrating the strengths of Swansea and the wider region.</p>
10.	<p>Councillors P M Meara, J Newbury & L G Thomas</p> <p>In the light of the recent report stating that Council Tax is the most common source of debt problems, could the relevant Cabinet Member inform Council:</p> <p>How many people in Swansea are in Council Tax arrears?</p> <p>How many new debtors would the Council expect as a result of the 4.8% rise in Council tax announced in the Budget?</p> <p>What steps does the Council take to resolve problems over Council Tax arrears?</p> <p>What counselling services are available to people in arrears?</p> <p>Response by The Leader</p> <p>1. How many people in Swansea are in Council Tax arrears?</p> <p>9578 people currently owe council tax and are subject to a liability order for non-payment. This figure includes outstanding council tax for all financial years.</p>

2. How many new debtors would the Council expect as a result of the 4.8% rise in Council tax announced in the Budget?

It is impossible to predict whether or not the increase will affect the numbers of people having difficulties with their payments. The Council offers a variety of payment methods and dates to suit all needs and takes recovery action in a timely manner to try and prevent payment problems arising in the first place. The number of liability orders issued during the past three financial years has fallen whereas the collection rate has improved year on year. This reflects improved collection procedures implemented over the past four years.

Financial Year	Number of Liability Orders	In Year Collection Rate
2012/13	9696	96.7%
2013/14	9075	96.8%
2014/15	8436	On target (96.8%)

It must also be borne in mind that the Welsh Government has maintained a level of 100% Council Tax Support for those deemed most in need in Wales.

3. What steps does the Council take to resolve problems over Council Tax arrears?

The Council is obliged to follow the statutory recovery process when council tax is not paid in accordance with the demand notice. However, if a council tax payer contacts the council tax section a mutually acceptable payment arrangement is always sought. If this cannot be achieved advice is given as outlined in 4 below.

4. What counselling services are available to people in arrears?

People are referred to the free debt advice organisations such as National Debtline, Citizens Advice Bureau, Step Change Debt Charity or the Money Advice Service. This information is also available on our website and is included with information sent with all liability orders.

11. Councillors L G Thomas P M Black, P M Meara

How many new homes does the Council expect to be built in Swansea during 2015, and what proportion of these will be affordable?

Response by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities.

The Swansea Joint Housing Land Availability Study Group chaired by the Council as local planning authority monitors housing build rates and forecasts future completions. Welsh Government guidance requires that this data is collated by financial year. For the period 2015-16 it is forecasted that around 560 dwelling units will be built. Of these it is estimated that around 230 (41%) will be affordable housing units, due to a significant number of schemes being brought forward by Registered Social Landlords.

12. **PART B – NO SUPPLEMENTRIES**

Councillors A M Day, J Newbury, T H Rees

The approved budget agreed that £22,000 will be removed from the Council's contribution to the WJEC. Can the Cabinet Member for Education tell Council:

- a. how many other Welsh local authorities are reducing their contributions and by how much, and ,
- b. what will be the impact of this reduction on services offered by the WJEC to schools and pupils in Swansea?

Response of the Cabinet Member for Education

“The WJEC is funded nationally by Local Authorities. There has been national agreement via the WLGA and ADEW to reduce the contribution funding in 2015/16 to around 43%. Each Local Authority has reduced their contribution by the same percentage and will be affected in the same way for 2015/16. The WJEC contribution covers 3 areas - Team Cefnogi (funding contribution to be removed completely in 2015/16), Youth Arts (30% of funding to be removed) and Education Resources (30% of funding to be removed). Discussion will take place with the Welsh Government with a view to reduce and remove the remaining contributions over the next few years.

The £22k of saving includes the WJEC reduced contribution and also the removal of small voluntary group funding (Tan Dance, CEWC Cymru)”.