



Cardiff County Branch

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UNISON's Response to Cardiff Council's Budget Consultation, January 2016

Who We Are

UNISON Cardiff County Branch is a trade union branch representing thousands of workers in The City of Cardiff Council, as well as staff of Cardiff Bus, Cardiff & Vale College and the privatised care sector. The following response has been authored in consultation with stewards from across the council.

Our Response to the Council's Proposed Budget

We welcome the news of the less harsh reduction in the proposed settlement from the Welsh Government in November 2015. We expect the council to utilise the unexpected £11.56m savings from this beneficial settlement to alleviate the pressure on council staff who have endured years of pay freezes, restructures and increased workloads.

We support the council's proposals to use reserves and to increase Council Tax by 4.5%, and hope that councillors will resist any political or press pressure to reverse these decisions. As we did in 2015, we would like to suggest that further savings might be found from selling or charging more competitive rents on "non-operational" properties which the council owns but does not provide public services from.

We are pleased that the budget proposals this year do not include any cuts to hours or enhancement rates, and note that this marks an improvement on the last two years. Similarly we acknowledge that the way in which the process has been handled appears to date to be an improvement on last year's process, during which frequent amendments and issues around changes to Voluntary Severance caused considerable distress to staff.

However this year's proposed budget is still a cuts budget which will lead to job losses and increased workloads, and contribute to the continued decline of public services which ultimately derives from the austerity policies of the UK Government. The 2015 General Election result suggests that these policies are likely to continue for some years to come, and we believe that the council ought to be doing more to liaise with the Welsh Government and other Welsh councils in order to find a long-term solution to the crisis in Local Government funding.

The Public Consultation

We welcome the emphasis that Cardiff Council places on public consultation compared to other authorities in Wales, and are pleased to learn that the level of engagement from residents again appears to be substantial.

However we do not agree with some of the euphemistic terminology used in the documentation – such as “Alternative Delivery Model” rather than outsourcing, or seeking “Community Asset Transfers” rather than withdrawing funding. Such language masks the reality of austerity, confuses residents unnecessarily, and performs some of the government’s public relations work for them.

Furthermore we believe that some of the questions are leading or otherwise flawed – for example the very first question which asks “do you recognise that a budget gap of a potential £45.6m for 2016/17 means that difficult budget choices are required?” and which allows only multiple-choice answers, does not allow for the possibility that the respondent might understand the facts but simply disagree. We don’t believe that much can be learned from analysing the answers to questions such as this.

However there are some questions in the document which we do wish to give specific answers to:

Q5 – We don’t think that “community groups and the third sector should be asked to run more services and facilities,” which until now have been delivered by the council.

Q9 – We don’t agree with the new, partly-outsourced model of day service provision for the elderly.

Q23 – We don’t agree with the “new model” for children’s play services which could result in the replacement of paid, trained staff with volunteers. The way that play centre staff were treated in the 2014 and 2015 budget consultation processes was particularly bad. A period of stability, free from the constant fear of restructures and job losses, is badly needed in this service area.

As an affiliated union, we note that as well as being contrary to UNISON’s policies which are voted upon at our National Delegate Conference, the three above proposals are also all contrary to Welsh Labour policy which holds that in the provision of public services the third sector should only be used in addition to, and not instead of it, the public sector.

Whilst we are not opposed to the use of volunteers in all circumstances, they are not appropriate in the context of service areas where posts are being deleted and where many part-timers would welcome the potential to work additional hours.

Q41 – We don’t support “the increasing of commercial activities” – ie. the setting up of a trading company owned by the council. If as it seems this question refers to the proposed establishment of an Infrastructure wholly-owned company (or WOC), this is already the subject of extensive ongoing negotiations, at which we have repeatedly made it clear that we consider wholly-owned companies to be a form of outsourcing with potentially negative implications for staff.

Service Area-Specific Points

Generally speaking, many of the figures for projected savings seem arbitrary or optimistic. ADMs (outsourcing) are generally presumed to bring significant savings but we do not accept that this will be the case.

The below are responses to specific itemised proposals, as listed and numbered in the Equality Impact Assessment.

City Operations

3. Privatisation of leisure services – the potential for job losses and negative changes to terms and conditions here are substantial, as are the risks of price increases, centre closures, and a negative impact on equality. Because of the law around NNDR relief, leisure trusts benefit from highly-favourable tax arrangements even when in reality they are owned by private profit-making companies. We believe that halting the tendering process and instead making the much-needed investment to improve the council's facilities would be a more effective long-term use of public money.

5. See above Q5.

13. This is very vague for such a potentially-substantial change. The £100,354,000 projected saving figure is presumably a mistake?

14. The council should ensure that all internal statutory planning services get a fair proportion of the fees raised by this measure.

17. What do the council or local residents gain from owning a heliport?

18. Electrical team. More detail is required for such a substantial saving from staffing costs.

57. Roath Library has now been closed for more than a year despite a very public assurance given last year that branch libraries would remain open. This library covers one of the most densely populated areas in Wales and with the relocation of Splott library to Tremorfa there will be a huge inner city area with no library service. We believe that the library ought to be re-established as part of an integrated service with paid, trained staff, ideally in its previous location or failing that then at another permanent location nearby.

Economic Development

80-85. Reduce arts grants to organisations. Although our branch does not represent UNISON members in these organisations, we wish to associate ourselves with the public campaigns to protect the arts, which have both an economic and a social value to the city.

Education

The real-terms decrease in delegated schools budget as a result of inflation and population growth could have a significant negative impact on staff and pupils alike. As the majority of schools revenue spending is on staffing, it is likely to lead to redundancies which will themselves have to be funded by the council, so it could be counter-productive even in straightforward cost-saving terms.

92. Specialised services. This will further exacerbate the cost pressure on schools, and is likely to have a negative equality impact, particularly with regards to disability.

99. Youth Service Budget. The funding for Youth Services has already been dramatically reduced since 2011. The consultation which was published in June 2015 began a process which is likely to end in dramatic reductions in staff numbers (with a potentially-disproportionate impact on part-time staff) and the closure of most of the city's Neighbourhood Youth Activity Centres.

We believe that these cuts are very short-sighted. These services are accessed by thousands of young people in Cardiff, and not only in deprived areas. We believe that the council should cease pushing youth services away from open access provision, and follow the recommendation of the recent Jay Report that “every effort should be made to increase this capacity.”

If the council has unexpectedly gained £11.56m as a result of the favourable Welsh Government settlement, then we believe that offsetting the swingeing cuts to Youth Services would be one of the best uses of these resources.

Resources

The projected savings from including services in the arms-length company are generally optimistic. For example Point 125 (Security & Cleansing) saving suggests a saving of £165,000, or approximately 6% of the service’s total budget, but the council’s own assessment rates this as red for achievability.

116. Corporate Digital Efficiencies. The introduction of e-payslips and digigov phone apps rather than paper payslips, as well as leading to the potential deletion of posts in Business Support, is unlikely to be universally welcomed by council staff. Sufficient provisions ought to be in place for employees who don’t regularly work with computers or have smartphones, or who need paper payslips for reasons such as claiming in-work benefits.

140. Reduction to third sector infrastructure funding. This is also highlighted as red/amber and in the current climate for the voluntary sector likely to prove problematic and politically difficult.

Property & Premises

165. Office accommodation. Any reduction in office space such as the forthcoming closure of Global Link should be adequately planned for. The number of staff based in County Hall has already been increasing in recent years, creating issues around a lack of office and parking space. The response from our members to the proposed introduction of “Agile Mobile Working” for Social Workers has not been positive, and we anticipate problems around “hot-desking” and confidentiality. We hope that any move towards Agile Mobile Working is not motivated solely by the desire to sell off office space.

Other

171. Severance Budgets. As we have stated at the Joint Partnership Forum, we are completely opposed to any further reductions in respect of the voluntary severance scheme. The reduction in 31st March 2015, and in particular the fact that sums were calculated based on the date of leaving with no consideration given to when requests were made or when restructures began, caused enormous stress and resentment. The change at that time was justified by the argument that it was necessary to bring Cardiff’s scheme into line with other local authorities in Wales. Since that is now the case there is no justification for a further reduction.

Workforce Demographics

Freedom of Information requests from Unison have shown that despite initiatives such as the Strategic Equality Plan, in 2013 only 6% of the council’s workforce was Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) compared to 15.3% of the city’s population. We believe that this unacceptable and that more ought to be done to increase the representation of BME people within the council’s workforce.

Conclusion

There is considerably more that could be said about many of the individual budget proposals, which have many and various implications for staff and residents. We hope that the above comments give some sense of the views and priorities of UNISON's members and their elected representatives.

We will continue to engage with councillors and council officers in negotiations to secure the best possible arrangements for our members, while campaigning for an end to the UK government's austerity policies which are the ultimate cause of job losses, pay freezes and cuts to public services.

Signed on behalf of UNISON Cardiff County Branch,



Emma Garson
Joint Branch Secretary



Michael Sweetman
Area Organiser