



Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol  
**MERTHYR TUDFUL**  
**MERTHYR TYDFIL**  
County Borough Council

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**SCHOOLS BUDGET FORUM WORKING GROUP**  
**Monday, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2024**  
**(Civic Centre)**

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**NOTES**

**PRESENT:** Stuart James (Afon Taf) - Chair  
Simone Roden (Ynysowen Community Primary)  
Anthony Lewis (Head of School Planning, Support & Resources)  
Louise Ballinger (Education Accountant)

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Joanna Lewis (LMS Manager)  
Gary Winston (Clerk to the Forum)  
Chris Jones (Building & Property Services Manager)  
Fairyal Pabani (School Catering Manager)

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:** Owen Morgan (Cyfarthfa Park Primary)  
Alwen Bowen (Ysgol Rhyd Y Grug)  
David Anstee (Ysgol Y Graig Primary)

No	Discussion/Action
1.	<p><b><u>Property Services SLA</u></b></p> <p>The paper containing Schools Budget Forum members queries and the service response which was circulated prior to the meeting was discussed with Chris Jones.</p> <p>Chris explained that Appendix A in the SLA has been updated to clarify the requirements for frequency of checks and whether it was LA or school responsibility. It was noted that the list was accurate at this time, however it was subject to change as a procurement exercise was currently being undertaken for some of the services.</p> <p><b>SR: How has the list of who is responsible been determined?</b></p> <p>CJ: We have used current guidance, but we are aware that some of the newer technology isn't covered as the guidance document needs to be updated, but we've reviewed and the servicing and maintenance costs would fall to the school, which is consistent with the current guidance. We are trying to get further clarification and we are aware that RCTs list may be different as they top slice more funding from schools to manage these responsibilities on their behalf.</p> <p><b>SR: How is the service costed for the SLA?</b></p> <p>AL: The cost is based on how much it costs to provide the service.</p> <p>CJ: The SLA barely covers two salaries and there are a lot more team members involved in supporting schools.</p> <p><b>SR: What is the legal requirement for fire risk assessments?</b></p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p>CJ: The corporate position is annually, they should also be required if there has been any major work.</p> <p><b>SR: If there is no requirement for an annual check, could we change it?</b></p> <p>CJ: It's something that would need to be considered corporately but it needs to be a consistent approach across all Council buildings which is annual. We are looking to bring the service in house and this should save on costs.</p> <p><b>SR: It seems that newer schools with more modern technology have not been taken into account. We don't receive any funding to pay for things like ground source heating or solar panels.</b></p> <p>AL: The funding model doesn't reflect the cost of new technologies, all schools currently have the same funding per square metre for building maintenance.</p> <p><b>SJ: We also had to pay a contribution towards the cost of our solar panels then other schools have had them provided for them.</b></p> <p>CJ: The regulations have changed and there is now a greater expectation that new school builds embrace green technology. Salix loans were used for a lot of schools.</p> <p><b>SR: Energy costs have become a huge issue for schools and bills this year are causing schools a lot of concerns. Are we fully funded for our energy costs?</b></p> <p>AL: We increased the level of funding for energy by the contract inflation every year, but we can do an updated analysis to see if funding meets costs.</p> <p><b>SR: Is there a requirement that PAT Testing is undertaken annually?</b></p> <p>CJ: Its biannual but in view of the safety implications they are carried out annually, in-line with council procedures. The cost is relatively small.</p> <p>SR: Costs may be minimal, but we need to look at all areas as savings would build up.</p> <p><b>SR: How much does PAT Testing cost?</b></p> <p>CJ: It depends on the number of items you have; I can get figures. My view is that testing should be annual, but we can look at it if necessary.</p> <p><b>SR: With regards to schools having five days to query invoices, most heads don't have the chance to check these, is there any way we could see them before they are paid?</b></p> <p>CJ: We are trialling another system with all schools invoices being batched up and sent to the schools for checking within 5 days. If not queried the invoices will be paid.</p> <p><b>SR: We never see any quotes for response repairs.</b></p> <p>CJ: No, you won't get a quote for any work put through as an emergency repair. The new system we will trial will give 5 days for schools to raise any concerns before the invoice is paid. Responsive Repairs are for emergency jobs and the priority is to get the work completed. A schedule of rates, which goes out to joint procurement with RCT are used for the pricing of all jobs.</p> <p><b>SR: I haven't seen the schedule of rates, are we charged for the call out as well as the job?</b></p> <p>CJ: It is a massive document. The call out is included in the cost of the job unless it requires</p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p>another person to attend to complete the job. If there is a separate call out charge it is £30.</p> <p><b>SR: When will the trial start?</b>  CJ: We can do it straightaway.</p> <p><b>SR: The costs of maintenance work is a big concern for all heads.</b>  CJ: I hear this, but we never get contact from schools on this.</p> <p><b>SR: Sometimes we only know the cost when we pay the invoice. Are we able to go externally and get quotes from private companies?</b>  CJ: Its very difficult, there are so many issues that need to be considered - specification, qualification, insurance. You would need to carry out your own checks and should get approval from the local authority as landlord. Every job is different so you'll never get a general quote for work - they will need to assess the requirements for each piece of work.</p> <p>SR: Also, jobs are just signed off, it is difficult for the head to see that everything has been done correctly, we don't have the expertise or the time.</p> <p>SJ: It is different in secondary schools where we have a site manager, and they take care of all of this, but I agree that a primary head would not be able to do that.</p> <p><b>SR: It says that 10% of jobs are checked, does that happen?</b>  CJ: Yes, it's Stuart Bowen's role to do this with a physical inspection of quality and to confirm the correct rates have been charged but others will support if necessary. There is also a questionnaire that schools can complete but we don't get any returns.</p> <p>AL: Could Heads be made aware when the sample checks are being carried out so there is visibility and transparency regarding them. If schools are buying the SLA then they are relying on these checks to give them assurance about the quality and price of jobs being done.</p> <p>CJ: Yes we can inform schools when these checks are being done so they're aware what jobs w've checked.</p> <p><b>SR: With regards to the questionnaire's - it isn't reasonable for a head to complete a questionnaire for every job. Do we need to review this?</b>  CJ: We could do it quarterly or termly, we can update the SLA to reflect that.</p> <p><b>SR: Schools have issues with many things such as the electric gates also the quality of work by ACE.</b>  CJ: We have not been informed of any concern with ACE, schools should get in touch if there are issues. The electronic gates are a problem, and we are currently going through a tendering process.</p> <p>There were no further questions and members thanked Chris for attending.</p>
2.	<p><b><u>School Catering SLA</u></b>  The paper containing Schools Budget Forum members queries and the service response which was</p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p>circulated prior to the meeting was discussed with Fairyal Pabani.</p> <p>Members thanked Fairyal for attending and discussed as follows:</p> <p>FP: The issues raised at the previous meeting have been answered in the written response, but I am happy to clarify further or take any other questions. The service is provided in accordance with the Welsh Government Healthy Eating Guidance and the Primary menu is now certified compliant by WLGA and contains the correct fruit / vegetable content as stated in the guidelines.</p> <p><b>SR: Portion sizes and choice have been a long running concern.</b></p> <p>FP: Guidance says that all junior age pupils should get the same size portions as infants. This has been queried and it is being reviewed by a national group. We have looked at the choice of meals and it would be easier for us to provide just a hot meal and vegetarian option, but the jacket potato and wraps are very popular.</p> <p><b>SR: Our children don't like every option and we end up with a lot of waste. Some of the options are not popular at all, can something be done?</b></p> <p>FP: It's not the same in all schools, we don't get complaints about the same items.</p> <p><b>SR: I could undertake a survey to find out what menu options result in a lot of waste across other schools.</b></p> <p>FP: I can do that; we could also have focus groups.</p> <p><b>SJ: Focus groups are never very representative as we tend to try and include all. We need to have something that finds the feelings of the majority.</b></p> <p>AL: We can ask all Heads to identify menu items that result in the most waste in their individual schools and consider if there is a consensus across the responses.</p> <p><b>Breakfast club menu options</b></p> <p>FP: We are now offering beans on toast once a week and although porridge did not prove popular when we trialled it, but we can trial it in all breakfast clubs to see how it goes.</p> <p><b>Provision of salad bars</b></p> <p>FP: We no longer have salad bars as they these were disposed of many years ago, and some remaining ones before the pandemic. Due to reasons of hygiene, extra demands on staffing and food waste, there is no current intention to reinstate. I've contacted all LAs about salad bars and there appears to be less than a handful of LA's that still use them (as per those detailed in the paper) and only in some schools. A side salad / crudites are offered with meals everyday and we now provide salad in a container which keeps it separate from hot food. All kitchens should be providing 5 items in a salad and they can choose from a variety of fruits and vegetables.</p> <p><b>SR: Guidance says that a variety of bread should be freely available at all times.</b></p> <p>FP: That's seems to suggest a basket of bread which would also have hygiene issues and also be a big waste concern. We currently provide bread where pupils are hungry after their meal but we are looking at providing bread when it is not on the main menu and will discuss with individual schools.</p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p><b>SR: Bread is an entitlement, and I don't see why this is an issue.</b>  <b>AL:</b> We accept that it is recommended although we don't offer it currently with every meal due to waste implications, only where pupils are hungry, and so this would have cost and waste implications. It's trying to balance these concerns so it would be best if we approach each headteacher to discuss how they would like bread to be offered to pupils in their school.</p> <p><b>SR: Why do we insist that a child has every item on their menu choice even if they say that they don't like something and don't want it? It's a waste of money and creates a lot of waste.</b>  <b>FP:</b> To meet nutritional standards, we have to provide the full meal.</p> <p><b>AL:</b> It's also important to give pupils the full meal and encourage them to try different foods.</p> <p><b>SR: Will a variety of bread be provided?</b>  <b>FP:</b> Yes, but brown bread is not popular with children. We are trialling pitta bread, but it goes hard quickly and so we'll see what the feedback is and also breadsticks.</p> <p><b>SR: Are breadsticks nutritious?</b>  <b>FP:</b> They are but they are not very filling.</p> <p><b>SJ: If bread is feely available, how can we control it, we have a big issue with obesity.</b>  <b>SR:</b> I don't see that; we only have children who are hungry.</p> <p><b>AL:</b> It's important that the offering of bread with meals and extra bread for hungry pupils is managed between the school and service.</p> <p><b>FP: Regarding providing free water in secondary schools this is now being monitored to ensure this is the case.</b></p> <p><b>SJ:</b> It is happening but it's not consistent. To be fair most pupils don't use the water and prefer to buy water bottles than use the free water provided but it needs to be offered for those who can't afford to buy bottles.</p> <p><b>AL: The catering operational supervisors are now monitoring this, and all kitchens have been informed it must be provided. If there are any instances where this doesn't happen, please let us know so this can be addressed with the kitchen straight away.</b></p> <p><b>FP:</b> We have also purchased large recycling bins for secondary schools for plastic, glass and cardboard. These are now in place in each canteen / hall.</p> <p><b>SJ: Radnor fizz is popular with pupils, but I think we should just have water.</b></p> <p><b>FP: It is a compliant product, but we also trialled flavoured water which was very popular, but it doesn't meet the guidance.</b>  <b>SJ:</b> I think we should just have plain water.</p> <p><b>FP: We have been working on how we can deliver fire safety training and delivered our first fire practice this morning. It will be rolled out across the Authority. We would like the kitchen</b></p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p><b>staff to have their fire safety training with the other staff in the school.</b></p> <p>SR: Im okay with that but you would need to discuss with each head.</p> <p>FP: I will do that, if it is not possible, we will arrange separate training. We will maintain the training record for our staff whether they are trained with schools or if separate raining is needed. The Safeguarding Training has almost been completed and all staff will have received it by the end of January and fire safety by the end of term.</p> <p><b>SR: Will medical training be provided?</b></p> <p>FP: We contacted the school nurse, but they no longer provide it, there is some on-line training, but certain candidates may need specific training for seizure medication i.e., buccal midazolam.</p> <p><b>SR: The new meal selection is going well but we have a query with payments/refunds - if meals have been paid for a week but they are then absent, how are parents refunded?</b></p> <p>FP: The school should arrange that through the office.</p> <p>JL: Yes, I'm sure we can help the school clerk if required. I'll confirm with Stacey.</p> <p><b>SR: Has the dessert menu been added to the meal selection as this hasn't been available?</b></p> <p>FP: We have a meeting this week with Cypad to follow that up.</p> <p><b>SR: Are children entitled to fruit and yoghurt as a dessert? There are days when they can have fruit and yoghurt as the fruit-based dessert and then on other days they can only have either fruit or dessert but not both. This confuses some pupils and causes issues as they don't understand.</b></p> <p>FP: The choice is fruit or yoghurt as an alternative dessert except twice a week where a fruit-based dessert is offered, on these days fruit and yoghurt is sometimes offered as the fruit-based dessert. We couldn't offer fruit and yoghurt together everyday as an alternative dessert, as it would be a cost and waste issue.</p> <p><b>SR: Is Cypad set up to reflect the menus for children who have allergies?</b></p> <p>FP: Yes, as far as I understand. We didn't have medical confirmation from some parents, so we have gone back to them.</p> <p>Members thanked Fairyal for attending the meeting.</p> <p><b>SR: When the Heads are surveyed regarding menu options and waste will this be shared with all Heads?</b></p> <p><b>AL:</b> Yes we can do this. We have also developed a service specific survey on various aspects of the service, this will be shared annually with Heads to provide feedback on various aspects of service. We were going to run this last year but haven't been able to due to ASOS. We can take this forward as part of the new SLA cycle.</p>
3.	<p><b><u>SLA Appendix 1 Amendments</u></b></p> <p>Following the feedback from the School Budget Forum Meeting and comments received by 15<sup>th</sup> December, Appendix 1 has been amended to give assurance to schools that the expectation is services will continue to be delivered during staff absences.</p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p>AL: I've also met with Laurence to discuss the specific concerns raised and we agreed some amendments to the clauses reflected in the papers shared. The clauses also address where services fail to deliver agreed standards and how a reimbursement could be applied or financial penalties where costs have been incurred by schools. We will take this now to next week's School Budget Forum Meeting for approval.</p> <p><b>SJ: Its not linked to financial penalties but I wanted to raise an issue regarding the HR SLA and the Internal Audit services. The requirements of the SLA should link with Audit requirements. We pay the SLA for HR but were criticised by Audit as we did not have a list of staff who had undertaken a DBS check, we pay HR to do this for us and I would have thought that would be sufficient, but it resulted in a negative audit comment.</b></p> <p>AL: It doesn't seem right, as long as HR were able to provide the list for the auditors upon request then that should be sufficient. The only additional element may be a check that the school has satisfied itself that the DBS checks are in place.</p> <p>AL: I also circulated the paper detailing the SLA queries and service responses initially shared in 5<sup>th</sup> December meeting. There were some additional queries regarding the Legal SLA and these have been discussed further and responded to.</p> <p>If there is any further feedback regarding the SLAs and the various services responses I would be grateful if you could get back to me this week and we will try and resolve them before next week's meeting.</p>
4.	<p><b>IR35</b></p> <p>AL: Discussions have been held with Payroll and Creditors and they have agreed to provide support and guidance for schools on completion of IR35, but it is the expectation that schools will complete the HMRC form.</p> <p><b>SR: Why can't they complete and get any information they need from schools?</b></p> <p>AL: There is concern regarding duplication of work and the service is currently under a lot of pressure due to staff turnover but are recruiting a new service manager who would lead the IR35 support.</p> <p><b>SR: They did it before and I can't see why that can't continue.</b></p> <p>AL: I didn't realise that, that's not the information we've been provided. The service view is that this support has never been provided and support/guidance is an increase on the offer there has been to date.</p> <p>JL: I wasn't aware Creditors were checking individuals on behalf of schools.</p> <p><b>SR: I understand that Huw was doing this for schools and that is what we want. He was certainly doing this for Ynysowen. It must be easier if you have one person doing it as they would be aware if they have been undertaking the same work in other schools?</b></p> <p>AL: Each school as the engager is responsible for the checks and the information provided. If Huw has been doing checks then he should have been sending copies of the HMRC outcome to you to agree before processing any invoices. Jo and I have both done HMRC checks internally but</p>

No	Discussion/Action
	<p>always list the engaging manager as the responsible person and agree the return with them as they are responsible for commissioning the contractor.</p> <p>We need to understand exactly what Creditors were doing for you and discuss further with Paul Davies, Commercial Manager who is responsible for the Creditors team and David Jones, Payroll Manager.</p> <p>JL: I can contact your school secretary to discuss further and find out exactly the support Huw was providing, but I agree it does seem odd Huw would carry out checks and not agree the checks with the school.</p> <p>AL: We'll also invite Paul and David to the Schools Budget Forum next Tuesday so that we can discuss further and resolve any outstanding issues.</p> <p>There were no further issues and the meeting closed.</p>