

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
13 JANUARY 2022
6.30 - 8.45 PM



Present:

Councillors Angell (Chair), Virgo (Vice-Chair), Mrs Birch, Brossard, Gbadebo, MJ Gibson, McLean, Mrs Mattick, Porter and Temperton
Mark Glanville, Parent Governor representative

Apologies:

Councillors Mrs McKenzie-Boyle and Mossom

Executive Members Present:

Councillor Birch, Executive Member for Adult Social Care, Health and Housing
Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance
Councillor Mrs Hayes MBE, Executive Member for Environment
Councillor Turrell, Executive Member for Planning and Transport

In attendance:

Councillor Brown

Also Present:

Kevin Gibbs, Executive Director: Delivery
Stuart McKellar, Executive Director: Resources
Ann Moore, Head of Democratic and Registration Services
Helen Pennington, Finance Business Partner
Ken Robinson, Finance Business Partner
Paul Clark, Finance Business Partner

47. Minutes of previous meetings

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings of the Commission held on 7 October and 4 November 2021 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chair.

The Chair agreed to follow up the concerns raised about the responses to the Police questions provided for the meeting on 7 October 2021.

48. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made.

There were no indications that members would be participating while under the party whip.

49. Urgent Items of Business

There were no items of urgent business.

50. Public Participation

No submissions had been made by members of the public under the Council's Public Participation Scheme for Overview and Scrutiny.

51. Highways Capital Programme

The Commission considered the report from the Environment and Communities Panel which had met to gain a stronger understanding of the Highways and Transport Capital Programme, particularly in areas such as funding, processes and prioritisation. The meeting was carried out in preparation for the review of the budget by discussing the programme with Bracknell Forest Council's Executive Director: Place, Planning and Regeneration and the Assistant Director: Highways and Transport.

There were seven key findings from the Panel as set out in the report. There were no recommendations arising from the meeting as the Panel were content that the methodology for identifying areas of concerns was sound and acknowledged that the funding received from central government was ringfenced. The Panel recognised that whilst highway maintenance was considered underfunded, the pressures within the Council meant that it was not possible to increase this element of the budget.

Arising from the discussion the following points were made:

- It was observed that the quality of the road network appeared to be deteriorating and the cost of rebuilding roads was higher than maintaining them. It was explained that the maintenance programme was prioritised on a risk basis therefore some roads or structures required rebuilding but wherever possible the life of roads would be extended using techniques such as grip fibre programme to recoat the roads.
- A new Highways Asset Maintenance Plan was being developed and based on the funding available, intervention works or rebuilding would be considered for the roads and structures identified as a priority. This was reviewed annually.
- Ringway was the Council's highways contractor and working with them the Council looked to deliver innovation projects such as using greener products which were better for the environment. It was explained that such technologies needed to be tested over time to ensure that they were durable for the lifespan of the repair required.
- **ACTION: Executive Director: Place, Planning and Regeneration to update the Commission on whether new materials containing recycled plastic were being used within the programme**
- Potholes could be reported through Customer Services and their repair would then be scheduled on a priority basis. The Council uses a system called 'Scanner' to survey the roads to assess if there were failings in the road structure, cracks and this information was used to build the profile of the network.
- **ACTION: In response to a query regarding new pothole filling technology the Executive Director: Place, Planning and Regeneration would clarify the current method for filling potholes used by the contractors**
- It was confirmed that local roads within estates were a lower priority from a safety and risk perspective due to the lower volume of traffic using those roads. The grip fibre programme which is a top dressing to bring roads up to a reasonable level and extend the life of the road is a regular feature in the Council's annual programme.
- A mixture of approaches was used to fund the improvement and maintain cycle lanes. Through Section 106 monies the cycle network was extended to fix connections whilst some government funding was received for alternative modes of transport.
- The existing cycle network would not require modifications for scooter use but further thought may be required on the etiquette of using them.

The Commission Chair thanked the Panel for their input to the session, for helping to produce the informative paper which would form an important part of understanding the budget consultation.

The Commission noted the Panel's Highways and Transport Capital Programme report.

52. Budget Consultation

The Commission considered the Council's draft budget proposals for 2022/23 before deciding whether they supported the recommendations which were open for public consultation. The Commission invited Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance and Stuart McKellar, Executive Director: Resources to attend the meeting to answer their questions on the details of the proposals. The Council's financial business partners: Helen Pennington, Paul Clark and Ken Robinson also attended the meeting to provide detailed information relating to services.

Arising from the discussion the following points were made:

- Assumptions had been made throughout the budget proposals as detailed settlement information was not available and known risks were projected so further adjustments would be made once the details were available and the level of pressures were confirmed.
- At the time the proposals were drafted a £3 – 5 million gap had been identified and an increase to council taxes by 4.49% would generate £3m towards that gap.
- The uncertainty of receiving an annual settlement for the third year made it difficult for longer term financial planning to be undertaken.
- The key message from the Executive Member for Transformation and Finance was that there were no proposed drastic reductions in services within the budget proposals.
- The settlement details announced an unexpected service grant for 2022-23 for £1.2m in addition to the funding expected.
- Although the borough's leisure services were contracted to Everyone Active, the Council continued to own the land and properties and therefore were responsible for their ongoing maintenance including the £120K golf green drainage and £50K roof repairs highlighted at both Coral Reef and Bracknell Leisure Centre.
- In relation to the roof repairs it was explained that the Sports Centre had multiple areas of roofing, a condition survey had been undertaken and this was a different area requiring maintenance in order to remain fit for purpose.
- In response to an enquiry on the sense of the ongoing cost repairs in favour of investing in a new building, it was explained that a long term project was in place to consider the changing requirements for residents but that ongoing maintenance was essential until a replacement was required.
- The £100K cost of remedial repairs to High Street car park to deal with cracks in concrete was raised, although it was noted that this was a safety issue requiring attention it was the quality of the system managing entry to the site which was of concern to some members. **Action: Executive Director: Delivery to take the concerns regarding the ANPR system back to the Parking Team.**
- It was clarified that the £100K on page 32 of the agenda papers referring to Local Transport Plan schemes related to improvements to the highways network.

- It was noted that the estimated £3.25m to be received from Community Infrastructure Levy was difficult to predict and would not cover these requirements of the significant infrastructure within the borough.
- In response to concerns raised regarding the lifespan of laptops and the technology available it was explained that the laptop refresh and replacement programme referred to on p.32 aimed to renew equipment every four years. This was part of the asset management programme with priority given to replacing older equipment. Councillors were reminded to report any equipment issues to the ICT Helpdesk.
- The Invest-To-Save scheme set out on page 31 of the agenda papers was highlighted as providing the opportunity for investing in innovation and new technology.
- Concerns were raised regarding potential missed opportunities to reduce climate change impacts when property repairs and maintenance were undertaken such as installing solar panels or insulation or to future proof equipment for example choosing boilers capable of being converted to use hydrogen. The agenda papers indicated on pages 40 and 41 that the impact on climate change had been assessed as not applicable. In response the Executive Member for Transformation and Finance stated that as a matter of practice professionals assessed sites for suitability for such schemes. **Action: Executive Director: Resources to feed these concerns back to the Assistant Director: Property.**
- It was confirmed that the Bridgewell Centre was not currently functioning as an Adult Social Care asset as it was being prepared to be redeveloped. A feasibility study would be developed to explore how it could be used as an asset to respond to the increased number of older residents with learning disabilities.
- The significant range of proposed cost for the works to address a safety issue at Garth Hill College was queried. It was noted that although this was a relatively new building this was not a design fault. The wide range in the estimate figures reflected that there were a number of potential solutions which were originally proposed but a cheaper scheme, expected not to exceed £150K, was being developed and would be funded from the capital programme. This was an example of changing information since the budget proposals were developed.
- The deletion of the climate change reduction initiative was challenged and it was explained that this had been approved for 2021/22 only. The ongoing approach to achieve climate change objectives was to ensure all spending decisions incorporate climate change consideration in their implementation. New climate change initiatives were also deliverable via the invest to save scheme.
- The Council had currently borrowed £80 million. This was made up of a range of loans with some due to be repaid over two and three years with others being repaid over a 50-60 year term. The average interest rate was 2 - 3%. This borrowing was monitored and reported through the Governance and Audit Committee.
- A review of the draft budget proposals would be undertaken to reflect changing circumstances which would present an updated assessment of the budget gap for councillors to assess how to bridge the gap from various options.
- It was acknowledged that the budget to cover the cost of Conservation and Heritage advice was not sufficient to cover the costs resulting from dealing with heritage matters.

- It was confirmed that if the additional costs incurred from dealing with Planning appeals could not be recovered they would be reported as a pressure on the budget.
- It was highlighted that in relation to the removal of the Climate Change Carbon Reduction Initiative it was not mentioned in the report that it was a one-off government grant.
- It was suggested that it would be useful to include further explanation at 5.2 on page 40 regarding the removal of items approved for one year as it was not clear. It was clarified that there had been a significant generous funding package to target the covid response and this had been used to pump prime some initiatives but this was supplementary to core budgets.
- The objective of the additional funding proposed to implement hybrid meeting was to enable full participation.
- Concerns were highlighted relating to the significant funding required for the pressures identified for both Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) (£7.5 million) and the High Needs Block (£20 million). It was confirmed that 8% government funding increases had been received in the previous two years but this was still lower than the pressures experienced so the costs continued to increase. This was a national issue and local authorities had a three-year period in which to balance their income and expenditure and there was another year to go in the process. The expectation was then to consider the accumulated deficit position nationally before further decisions were made.
- It was confirmed that the costs associated with restructuring the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) team would be considered as part of the final proposals but those costs had not been included in the draft proposals.
- The approach used to model the potential costs in uncertain circumstances was for services to develop best and worst case cost scenarios.
- The Employment Committee was undertaking a project to review initiatives to address increasing staffing costs, retention issues and agency workers within social care.
- It was acknowledged that the costs associated with waste management were complicated and there was a difficult balance between increasing the level of food waste collected and the cost benefits that could be achieved due to the thresholds within the current contractual arrangements.
- Although there was business rate relief available for small businesses there was not something specifically in place to promote or support new businesses. This was a national position rather than a local choice option.
- It was accepted that the £500K saving on agency staff spend was proposed as a speculative target against the current £4m spend. The intention was to provide a challenging but deliverable target to frame the ongoing work to reduce core spending within the organisation and as such reduce the risk of overspending. It was acknowledged that although the cost of agency staff had been identified as a challenge in the past a savings target had not previously been set.
- In previous years a handful of people responded to the public consultation and this tended to fluctuate when there was a particular issue. To date 70 responses had been received with a large number appearing to be from taxi drivers regarding proposed changes to licensing charges.
- The consultation was promoted through social media, via business newsletters and other publications.
- It was explained that undertaking a participatory budget exercise would not be possible without the certainty of a longer-term settlement.

- The Department for Education were reducing by 20% per annum grant support for a range of areas supporting vulnerable pupils, such as education support for children looked after. The pressure of £71k was to supplement this funding to ensure the continuation of this support.
- It was confirmed that the Council currently had £10m in general reserves and £18m in future funding reserve as funding issues had been anticipated for some time. In the past the Audit Commission had recommended that Councils retain 5% in reserves but there was no restrictions or limits. Councils were in different financial positions across the country. It was clarified that it was misleading as for example due to changes in business grants additional funding was available but the Council had been unable to spend it during the year it had been awarded. The large amounts provided to support the response to covid had been paid out directly to local businesses in the form of business grants.
- It was reflected that the Councils reserves were prudent with significant issues on the financial horizon and that the reasons for maintaining the current levels of reserves needed to be robust so as not to be interpreted as additional or available.
- It was explained that there was no correlation between the level of the new homes bonus and target number of new homes that needed to be built in the borough.
- It was reiterated that in uncertain circumstances the best case budget scenario would be included in the reviewed draft proposals and that the risk of the worst case scenarios would be managed through corporate contingency planning.
- **Action: Executive Director: Resources to advise the Commission on details of the combined figure of £230K listed as 'Other' on page 29 of the agenda papers which related to Property Services**

The Commission supported the recommendations as presented in the agenda papers relating to the capital programme and the revenue element of the budget.

53. **Council Plan Overview Report**

The Chair advised the meeting that this item had been deferred to the next Commission meeting.

54. **Work Programme Update**

Each Panel Chair provided a verbal update on work programme progress.

Education, Skills and Growth

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) review scope had been circulated but members of the Commission had not had time to consider it in advance of the meeting.

The Commission supported the programme that had been developed continuing to progress but deferred approval of the draft SEND scope to the next Commission meeting.

Health and Care

The review activity had concluded for the Mental Health review scope and recommendations were discussed at a meeting on 10 January 2022. The review

report was being drafted and would be brought for consideration to the April Commission meeting.

Environment and Communities

A programme of activity had been developed for the Integrated Enforcement review and this was due to launch in February with the schedule of witnesses still in development.

55. **Forward plan and decisions taken**

The Commission noted that the information regarding upcoming decisions and any decision taken had been included to enable discussions as appropriate. This would be shared on future agendas as information rather than an item.

CHAIR