

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
12 JANUARY 2023
6.30 - 8.16 PM**



Present:

Councillors Angell (Chair), Virgo (Vice-Chair), Mrs Birch, Brossard, MJ Gibson, Mrs Mattick, Mrs McKenzie-Boyle, Temperton and Heydon

Present Virtually:

Councillors McLean, Mossom and Porter

Apologies for absence were received from:

Kevin Gibbs, Executive Director: Delivery

Executive Members Present:

Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance

Executive Members Present Virtually:

Councillors Mrs Hayes MBE, Executive Member for the Environment

Also Present:

Sue Halliwell, Chief Executive

Stuart McKellar, Executive Director: Resources

Victoria Hill, Parent Governor representative

40. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 3 November 2022 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

Responses to all of the queries and requests for information raised in the meeting had been received or formed part of the agenda.

41. 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.

42. Urgent Items of Business

There were no items of urgent business.

43. Public Participation

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

44. Budget Consultation

The Commission considered the Council's draft budget proposals for 2023/24 which were open for public consideration. 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.

Prior to detailed questions Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance provided a recap:

- There was a significant budget gap that needed to be addressed through a combination of further savings, raising council tax and transfers from reserves. It was added that there was flexibility to raise the council tax by three percent plus two percent, which was understood to be the increase applied by the vast majority of other authorities. A point was added that one of the Council's key manifesto pledges was to remain within the 10 lowest council tax bands of the unitary authorities. Whilst the settlement was published last month the details were still being worked through.

Stuart McKellar, Executive Director: Resources added the following points:

- The finance settlement provided some answers and helped to put the draft budget in the overall funding context. However, the 2023/24 budget was complex due to the national revaluation of the business rates system. In addition, the Government changes to the designation of businesses from local lists to the Government central list had impacted large telecoms companies, with Bracknell Forest being the most significantly affected council in England. The Summer 2022 consultation around the Government's planned approach to achieve a cost neutral impact from this change provided some reassurance for the Council.
- The finance settlement was positive in the respect that there was a small increase in funding of about £130 000 relative to what was expected. The grant for social care provided a further £600 000 which could be used to fund either existing pressures or new spend.
- The reserves will be used to balance the budget, within the region of £4.5 – 5 million pounds, in line with the planned amount. Final budget decisions including the level of Council Tax would not be made until February 2023 when all the information and full context were available.

Arising from the discussion the following points were made:

Capital budget

- Clarification was sought regarding whether the budget was based on council tax being raised by 4.99%. The response by the Executive Director: Resources was that the budget was prepared on an expectation of 3% prior to the information in the Autumn budget and that there was now flexibility to increase it further. It was also noted that regardless of the council tax changes a large sum of the reserves would need to be used. The significance of income from council tax increases is that it is always there as revenue whereas reserves will run out at some point. The Member for Transformation and Finance added to this response by commenting inflation and salary awards have also added pressures.
- A question on the capital programme around funding for schools was raised. The question was whether this funding was for all schools, maintained and academies. It was clarified that this funding was only for maintained schools, with academies being funded directly. A further question was raised about if Bracknell Forest would receive any grant funding for schools. It was clarified that Bracknell Forest would not expect to receive any grant to enhance the scale of current provision due to there being surplus places in schools. There was however a possibility to receive some funding for maintenance.

- In relation to scheduled computer equipment and the impact of phase 4 not being completed due to increased costs, it was explained that all staff would still have access to equipment but that it may be older equipment is not refreshed. Frustration was expressed about using older, less efficient equipment and a question was asked about what the extra cost to complete phase 4 would be. **Action: Executive Director: Resources to ask IT department for detailed costs.**
- A query was raised about maintenance of the High Street car park, specifically around issues with the structure, as there was no reference to it in the capital programme. It was noted that this was generally covered by the maintenance programme. However, due to the scale it might need to be looked at as a separate capital proposal.
- It was noted that there was no money allocated for the Coronation within the capital budget. It was acknowledged that this was something which needed to be considered in the final budget proposal. A further point was made by the Chief Executive that there was revenue budget allocated to this.
- In relation to the issue of the weight of electric cars causing potential damage to car park structures a question was raised about when or if, in the future, there would be money within the budget to address this problem. In response it was explained that before anything was seen in the budget there would need to be conditioned surveys to test the load conditions of car parks. It was acknowledged this would mainly be a problem for older car parks. A further point was made that the consideration of added weight from electric vehicles was currently part of the work of the consultant engineers employed by the Council.
- Concern was raised around the infrastructure upgrade within car parks and if this implied the loss of ticket machines. In response it was explained that there is a project currently in place to look at how ticketing within car parks could be improved in terms of response times and reliability as more people go online. Further concern was shared that this would be a retrograde step and it was suggested this was taken offline.
- Concern was raised about the statement within funded highways maintenance regarding the point that many significant maintenance projects are now beyond reach and an acceptance that there will be increasing highway claims due to reduced condition levels. It was pointed out that the Council get a lot of funds and grants for major highway projects and the question was asked about if it was possible to receive more money through government grants for projects like repair of potholes. It was explained that the wording of this was set out to explain the proposal to add an extra £1.6 million from council funds in addition to grant funding. It was however acknowledged that the wording within this part would be reviewed.
- A point was made about the spend on roads within the borough with concern for the upkeep of infrastructure due to lack of funding. A request was made for an accurate and detailed breakdown of spend for highways. It was acknowledged that the budget papers focus on changes to budgets rather the current spending levels and so the current allocation covering the revenue budgets as well would need to be looked at to answer this question fully. **Action: Executive director: Resources to provide further information.**
- In response to a question about whether the Council spent £30k applying for an investment zone which has now been withdrawn it was clarified that the only costs associated were with officer time.
- The highway network is a valuable asset, and it was noted that more money being spent on it was a positive point. However, it was noted that there was an error in the figures and clarification was sought. The Executive Director: Resources explained that the increase referred to in the detailed text from £1.2 million to £1.8 million would be achieved in 2025/26.

- A further point was made that this was not a high figure and concern was raised that this would have a negative impact on infrastructure. In response, it was noted that Bracknell Forest were among a minority of councils who are able to significantly supplement the level of Government capital grant funding from their own resources. The Executive Member for Transformation added a further point that in addition to this funding there was also money from ongoing maintenance revenue budgets.
- A question was asked about how much money has been given towards play equipment within the borough to ensure they remain safe. The answer was that due to investment in previous years bringing equipment to a reasonable standard there was no inclusion for funding within this area in this budget. A further point was raised that a lot of the play areas are owned by the parishes, although this is not always the case. It was agreed that this point would be taken offline for further discussion.

Revenue Budget

- A point was raised around the transport strategy, which stated that the council were putting an additional £387k in 2023/24 with a question being asked about what the total contribution to this was. Due to not having the base budget information available it was not possible to answer this question although members were assured that the aim was to continue funding at the same level to ensure the same network coverage as now. **Action: Executive Director: Resources to advise of this total.**
- It was noted that external auditor fees are going to increase next year, and a question was raised about why it was not in the 2023/24 budget. It was confirmed that the increased costs of around £100 000 will be felt in 2024/25, when the audit of the 2023/24 accounts will take place.
- A query was raised about Forest care and the removal of pressure, asking why this wasn't shown until 2024/25 where money back is shown. In response it was explained that Forest care is a trading arm which should break even, therefore it was expected that by 2024/25 a business plan would be brought forward to secure that position. Further clarification was provided through the explanation that the commitment budget shows a three-year plan which relates to next year and future years.
- Under savings within ground maintenance the reduction of weed spraying from 3 to 2 sprays per annum was challenged citing a risk of greater damage to verges and roads which could cause future pressures. It was noted that this reduction of sprays had occurred a few years ago and was subsequently reinstated due to damage caused. In response it was clarified that the reduction was put forward as a budget saving, to address the significant levels of savings required. The impact of this would need to be addressed back to the service area who had done an assessment of the risks prior the decision. **Action: Executive Director: Resources to provide additional information regarding the risk assessment.**
- Under savings within ground maintenance/street cleaning the 25% reduction in litter bins through the Borough which would provide a saving of £30k in 2024/25 was challenged. Concern was that this reduction would have an adverse effect resulting in more litter. In response to this decision, it was stated that this was identified as a further saving. Members of the Commission strongly felt that risking the cleanliness of the borough, for a saving of £30k was letting residents down, diluting services and potentially adding to the Boroughs carbon footprint and wished to make clear to the Executive their opposition to this draft saving proposal. An additional concern was raised that the proposed reduction to the large-scale fly tipping budget could also contribute to a greater number of incidents of fly-tipping. It was felt that decisions regarding savings in areas like this needed to be made through a strategic approach. The Executive Director:

Resources clarified that the views on this topic would go to the executive, via the minutes of the meeting, and be considered as part of the final budget proposals.

- During the pandemic staff car parking charges were suspended, regarding the possible reintroduction of these a question asked about whether the reintroduction would hinder retention of staff and impact wellbeing. It was clarified that when these are reintroduced, they would be small charges of around £5-£10 per month.
- A query was raised about the additional above inflation payments for the waste collection contract and whether this was to cover salary increases for the staff. It was explained that this recognises that the Council have worked proactively to provide a realistic pay level for staff and to cover cost of running vehicles to ensure the Council would not face industrial disputes.

Fees and charges

- Under concessionary fares it was pointed out that the new annual Senior Citizen Railcard was going to be increased from £17 to £19 which was an 11.8% increase, a question was asked about how this was decided. It was explained that the fees and charges were approached within average guidelines and each individual service area would look at average figures in relation to the market situation. It was noted that all areas, businesses, and individuals are facing a cost-of-living crisis and a balance had to be found to be able to continue to provide the statutory and discretionary services to residents.
- A £5 increase on brown bin charges was noted and questions were asked about how this decision was made and calculated. It was explained that a standard increase of around 7.5% is applied and that each area looks into the applicability of that for those charges. Whilst it was agreed that this does offer value for money the council needed to ensure it was reviewed with the long-term impact in mind.
- A question was raised about why the increase to marriage and civil partnership is smaller this year than next - 3% for 2023/24 and 7.5% for 2024/25. It was acknowledged that the service area would have looked at these proposals with an awareness of the market around them.
- Under cemetery it was noted that for a person aged 18 or over there was no change to fees. However, fees for a child aged 3 years 1 day -17 years 364 days was increasing by 7.9 % and fees for a stillborn child, foetus or under 3 was increasing by 7.7%. It was felt that these increases in fees were focussing on the wrong people. The Executive Director: Resources recognised that this was a sensitive area, and these increases were made through careful review. **Action: Executive Director: Resources to provide additional information regarding how these decisions were made.**
- Regarding agency staff and the aims around keeping costs down within this area it was confirmed that there has been a large amount of work within children's and adult social care staff. There has been a review of terms and conditions to make them more attractive. The first adverts with these changes were published in early January 2023 and it was anticipated that this would help attract and retain more staff. This methodology was also hoped to be implemented across other areas including planning.
- A comment was made about the budget calculation of the council tax stating its complex use of percentages rather than meaningful figures. It was felt that this wasn't presented in a way that was meaningful to the public. In response the Executive Director: Resources explained that at this stage they are only looking at the tax base calculation and that the actual level of tax levied by the police authority, fire authority and local parish town councils goes through the full council meeting in February 2023. Whilst this is a technical matter and might not be of

interest to some members of the public at this stage, it was important to parish and town council colleagues.

- Clarification was sought around the council tax levy of 4.99% and if this would ease problems raised. The draft budget proposals set out a budget gap of almost £8 million which assumed no increase in council tax. The greater the council tax rise the less reliance on reserves and realistically this was the only sustainable financial position for the council in the long term.
- With the removal of the council tax support that was in place for 2023/24 a point was made that the new system of support available from new government grants should be adequately publicised. It was agreed that once final budget discussions had taken place, and this was confirmed it would be shared.

45. **Council Plan Overview Report**

CPOR report Q2

The Chief Executive highlighted that the Council are looking to improve the clarity of their messages in terms of performance. Some changes have been made throughout the report to make it more engaging with narrative and visuals. The aim was to make it easier to capture key messages using graphs to present and track trends. There was also an additional section to include community health indicators which would provide a broader context set against the performance of other councils.

It was noted that there have also been some changes to the website to ensure this information benefits the public when they try to find out the performance of their Local Authority. Key highlights for Q2 were that children's services achieved an outstanding Ofsted result. The Council agreed the financial hardship action plan which took a strategic and sustainable cross-council approach in supporting residents to become more financially sustainable.

Several community events have been facilitated, including the Royal funeral and support for Ukrainian arrivals. There have been some challenges including inflationary and general costs amongst all service areas. Despite these challenges 81 % of actions are on track to support the council plan.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:

- A question was asked about the quarterly indicators on satisfaction with customer services. This was down from 81% to 59.2% and concern was raised about reasons behind this or even an explanation of how it was measured. The Chief Executive explained that this was as a result of a specific resourcing issue that was no longer a problem.
- A query was raised regarding whether the KPI's for SEND, which would be good indicators to highlight improvements, would be reported in the quarterly report. This was asked because it was felt that for many concerned parents there was a need to show improvements are being made. Further concern was raised that there was not a place in the report to display progress figures and simply stating that the assessment team have worked to reduce the number of out of time assessments and finalise a number of long outstanding cases did not address the issues. It was felt that clear identification of how these are being managed was required. The Chief Executive accepted that this was a challenge and that the key indicators would be revised, and these concerns addressed.
- Concern was raised that with the local elections on 4 May 2023 the Coronation of the King on 6 May 2023 would be overlooked. It was confirmed that budget had been allocated to support the Coronation and in addition to this the Lexicon had a project underway to create the largest crown in Berkshire out of a mural of photos

submitted by residents. The council's communications team were aligning and working together with the Lexicon on this event.

- In response to a query about the strategy to deliver IT and whether this work in progress was on track the chief Executive confirmed that there were no issues escalated and would therefore be on target.

46. **Primary Parent Governor Representative Appointment**

Victoria Hill was formerly appointed as the Primary Parent Governor representative on the Education, Skills and Growth Overview and Scrutiny panel.

47. **Work Programme Update**

Environment and Communities

The RAG rating for Enforcement strategy review was green and it was aiming to have the draft report ready for the February commission meeting.

Looking ahead the panel was hoping to review the burial choices in response to tests that were concluded on a piece of land identified within this review. Additionally, after the May 2023 elections the panel was planning to look at the introduction of food waste in flats as this was not performing as well as it should be.

Education, Skills and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The final meeting for the Child Criminal Exploitation review was due to take place and would present the final six recommendations. The draft report was on track for the February commission meeting.

Work was ongoing to discuss what topics would be covered in the next four years.

Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The start of the adult safeguarding review was delayed due to officer sickness but was otherwise on track with meetings planned. The review of the blue badge review was to take place and would provide an update on progress against recommendations agreed.

CHAIRMAN