

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
9 JANUARY 2025
6.31 – 8.37PM**



Present:

Councillors Pickering (Chair), McLean (Vice-Chair), Barnard, C Eberle, Egglestone, M Forster, Haffegée, McKenzie-Boyle, Pressland, Watts and Webb

In Attendance Virtually:

Councillor Watts

Also in attendance:

Councillors Temperton and Neil
Stuart McKellar Executive Director Resources
Damian James Assistant Director Contract Services
Ann Moore, Assistant Director: Democratic & Registration Services

Also in attendance Virtually:

Gareth Jones, Head of Climate Change and Sustainable Living
Seb Wright, Climate Change Officer
Susan Halliwell, Chief Executive

Visiting Councillors:

Councillors Cochrane and Hayes

Apologies for absence:

Councillor Frost

44. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 5 December 2024 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chair.

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

45. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or indications that members would be participating while under the party whip.

Due to direct involvement with the draft climate change strategy, Cllr Haffegée and Cllr McKenzie-Boyle would be leaving the meeting ahead of agenda item 7, draft climate change strategy.

46. Urgent Items of Business

There were no items of urgent business.

47. Public Participation

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

48. Draft Budget

The draft capital and revenue budget proposals for 2025-2026 were presented by Councillor Neil, cabinet member for finance and corporate improvement, and Stuart McKellar, Executive Director: Resources. The focus was on protecting services for vulnerable residents, maintaining high-quality frontline services, and balancing the budget amidst rising costs and service demands.

Financial Challenges:

- The budget pressures amounted to £8.4 million, with identified savings of £5.3 million, leaving a projected budget gap of just over £3 million.
- Inflationary pressures, increased service demands, and funding uncertainty were highlighted as key financial challenges.

Capital Program:

- The capital program budget proposals for 2025-2026 to 2027-2028 included a total proposed capital program of £14.4 million.
- Key priorities included property maintenance, new school places, housing stock maintenance, and highways maintenance.
- The program emphasized maintaining critical infrastructure while balancing fiscal responsibility and community needs.

Funding Sources:

- The proposed capital program for 2025-2026 included £8.4 million funded by the Council and just under £6 million from external sources such as government grants, Section 106 contributions, capital receipts, and borrowing.
- There was increased reliance on borrowing, which required careful management to avoid further pressure on the revenue budget while properly maintaining assets.

Identified Savings:

- Identified savings of £5.3 million focused on efficiency, income generation, and support service reductions.
- Proposed reductions to non-essential services included scaling back grounds maintenance, reducing parking payment machines, and closing the upper decks of Braccan Walk car park for three months a year to save £9,000 on business rates.
- Fee increases were proposed, including increasing residents' parking zone fees by £10 and the brown bin garden waste service by £5 to make these schemes self-funding.

Public Engagement and Consultation:

- Public engagement and consultation on the budget proposals ran from 11 December 2024 to 21 January 2025.
- Feedback from the consultation would be considered before the final budget recommendation to the cabinet on 11 February 2025.

Discretionary Rate Relief for Charities:

- The consultation aimed to align the local relief system with other authorities and make it fairer and more affordable.
- The current rate relief provided an automatic 80% relief on business rates for charities, with local authorities offering relief on the remaining 20%.
- Proposed changes aimed to provide appropriate financial relief for charities supporting local people, paid for by local taxpayers.

Technical Update on Finance Settlement:

- The finance settlement included minor changes in grants and additional funding for social care.
- The higher social care grants allocation resulted in an additional £200,000, and a children's social care prevention grant of £250,000.
- The employers' National Insurance increase was expected to cost Bracknell Forest Council about £1.2 million, with an estimated government funding of £950,000, leaving a shortfall of around £250,000.

Budget Risks and Assumptions:

- Budget risks and assumptions included social care demand, inflation, and asset maintenance.
- Concerns were raised regarding the impact of National Insurance and minimum wage increases on local charities and care providers.

RESOLVED that cabinet is asked to:

- Conduct a detailed analysis of the risks articulated in the meeting, including inflation, and borrowing costs.
- Assess the impact of changes on residents, particularly those related to services outside the Council's direct control.
- Ensure that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission has greater input into the budget throughout the year in advance of September.
- Consider the maintenance requirements of suburban highways to ensure their upkeep and functionality.
- Use personas in next year's budget consultation.
- Consider the impact of National Insurance and minimum wage increases on local charities.

49. **Draft Climate Change strategy**

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Temperton and Assistant Director, Damian James introduced and presented slides on the draft climate change strategy. The following points were noted:

- Aims of the strategy were to achieve net-zero emissions, support residents in reduction of emissions and preparation for climate change impacts.
- Importance of community engagement and involvement of residents and volunteers.
- Use of consultations and surveys to gather feedback.

- Financial Responsibility: Ensuring emission reduction efforts were financially sustainable. Investment in green initiatives and retrofitting.
- Role of Volunteers and Experts: Collaboration with universities and experts which would contribute to behaviour change and community projects.
- Housing Standards: Focused on retrofitting older homes to improve energy efficiency. Development of partnerships with housing associations and reputable companies.
- Monitoring and Reporting: Set up systems that monitored progress and reported on achievements. Ensured transparency and accountability.
- Ensured the journey to Net Zero was fair to everyone through commitment and illustration of impact.
- Financially responsible decisions based on evidence were made.
- Focussed on the needs and priorities of Bracknell Forest and considered climate impact in procurement, travel, and transport.
- Strategy would harness innovation and technical developments and made sure ongoing efforts with residents and solar panel initiatives were developed.
- The strategy saw the council as playing a leadership role in the wider borough which worked to address emissions at different levels of influence through activities such as:
 - Consideration for climate impact in procurement
 - Stronger influence considering climate when setting policy and delivering place-shaping actions.
 - Encouragement of others to buy into the initiatives.
- Delivery phases were split into 3:
 - Phase One: Transition, which included to start looking and planning, conduct research and exploratory work. Set the direction for the year.
 - Phase Two: Acceleration: Lay the groundwork and building capacity. Development of skills and make business cases. Get businesses and other stakeholders on board and to make sure there was organisational buy-in.
 - Phase Three: Delivery, which included Implementations of actions and made sure everything was in progress.
- Enablers for the above phases were to make sure organisational capacity and skills were available, funding was in place, communications and engagement were being used and development of partnerships and support.
- Delivery of the plan would be achieved through:
 - Extensive monitoring and outreach efforts would be in place to ensure the success of the plan.
 - Investments would include boilers, ceiling installations (e.g., Priestwood Community Centre), flood protection, drainage work, door and window replacements, and ventilation improvements.
 - Volunteer Support: Improvements like double glazing were planned to create better environments for volunteers to work in.

- Phased Actions: The plan outlined actions for phase one and provided a list of large-scale actions for future phases, with detailed strategies, costs, and monitoring methods.
- Achievements to date noted were:
 - Successful solar panel initiatives (Solar Together).
 - EV charging infrastructure.
 - Waste reduction, especially food waste.
 - Promotion of active transport (cycling clubs).
 - Retrofitting buildings and using electric council vehicles.
 - Tree planting and landfill reduction.
- The strategy aimed to continue these efforts and address remaining challenges over the four years.

The following was noted during discussion:

- In response to a question around timing of the phases it was explained that they were designed to roll together smoothly, with ongoing activities and no strict year-by-year separation although a rough guide was provided.
 - Phase one would last one year, focusing on setup, appointing people, planning, governance, measurements, and initial quick fixes. The goal was to have measurable improvements by the end of the year
 - Phase two would begin in the next year, aiming to accelerate efforts.
 - Phase three would be planned for the last two years, focusing on full implementation of the plans. Efforts would continue without pause, ensuring continuous progress.
- Oxford Council was a leading example who had achieved significant progress in their climate action efforts, reaching net-zero emissions. Bracknell Forest Council were working closely with them and planned to invite one of their key representatives to the next joint climate change action board meeting. Oxford's approach emphasized reduction over recycling, which had been a crucial factor in their success. This collaboration aimed to learn from Oxford's strategies and implement similar effective measures in Bracknell.
- Training and retention of staff will be achieved through:
 - Collaboration with universities like Royal Holloway and Reading for knowledge sharing.
 - Volunteers would offer free advice on behaviour change and economic benefits.
 - Apprenticeship would be offered to attract and retain staff by providing additional skills.
 - Encouraging staff to work with external organizations for broader exposure.
- Use of consultancy staff would be limited use due to high costs although their could be potential use of a consultancy for measuring Scope 3 emissions which was complex and difficult to measure. A cabinet report on this was expected in the coming months.
- A decision on the proposal for the £2000 staff free bus travel to work scheme was dependent on budget approval. If it was implemented this figure was based on the new bus fare rates.

- The main focus was on improving housing in the borough, particularly older homes built in the 1950s that cannot retain heat. The Cabinet Member for Housing was working closely with Abri and other housing associations to address this issue through retrofitting, which would depend on government grants. Abri was actively involved in discussions with Parliament about retrofitting.
- There were plans to involve reputable companies to ensure quality work like the "Solar Together" initiative. The goal was to make homes more energy-efficient and cost-effective for residents, including those who own older homes.
- The success of the climate strategy would depend on how well it resonated with residents. To measure progress and engagement, the council planned to survey residents to understand their connection with the strategy. This would help gauge early engagement before seeing significant emission reductions.
- In relation to financial sustainability, the council acknowledges the need to balance investment in housing improvements with other essential services like social care. The aim was to maintain investment by building partnerships and securing initial investments to ensure long-term sustainability. The council was committed to creating a green economy and ensuring that the strategy was supported by both the council and external partners.
- Effective ways to engage those people who don't feel climate change is their top priority could include:
 - Talking to residents about the benefits of initiatives. Volunteers were noted as playing a significant role in spreading the message and engaging with the community.
 - Through emphasising the direct benefits, such as reducing fuel poverty and saving money, could help residents see the value in climate change efforts. For example, better insulation and retrofitting can lead to lower energy bills.
 - Explaining how proper recycling and energy efficiency could save significant amounts of money, which can then be redirected to other essential services like social care.
 - Leveraging the passion of volunteers who prioritise these issues can help spread awareness and encourage others to get involved.
- The council had not yet considered a ban on wood burners. However, there were regulations on what can be burned, and the Public Protection Partnership was responsible for enforcing these rules. They have been working to publicise and engage with the public about the proper use of wood on fires, including both open fires and wood burners.
- It was confirmed that the council had an annual report on the progress of their strategies, which included opportunities to engage with residents and collect feedback. The upcoming community climate change strategy would include targets and monitoring to ensure community involvement and also involve consultations to understand how it was being received by residents.
- Demolition of buildings was noted as a significant factor in climate change due to the carbon emissions involved. The council was

considering the environmental impact of demolishing and repurposing buildings as part of their climate strategy.

- The demolition of the High Street Car Park was being carefully planned to minimize carbon emissions. This included considering the materials used, how they would be disposed of, and the overall environmental impact.
- The council aimed to recycle as much material as possible from demolition sites and ensure that new structures were built in a climate-friendly manner. This included both the construction process and the long-term maintenance of the buildings.

The following recommendations to cabinet were agreed:

- To explore the best mechanism to gain the views of residents regarding climate change, making sure to reach a cross-section of the community.
- To avoid conducting surveys simultaneously to prevent survey fatigue and ensure higher response rates.

50. **Work Programme Update**

Health and Care Panel Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The panel would be reviewing the mental health recommendations shortly.

A decision on the rebuild of the Royal Berkshire Hospital (RBH) was expected soon, following a national review of the hospital rebuilding program. A decision would then be made on the possibility of setting up a joint health overview and scrutiny committee.

Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

A meeting had taken place to discuss the housing scope, the topic would be is Bracknell Forest Council delivering social housing for residents and the formal scope would be presented to the Commission at a later date.

Chair