

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Thursday 18 February 2021 at 5.45pm

Present: Councillor L Giles (Chair);
Councillors E M Giles and Moore.

In Attendance: Councillors Ali, Piper and Preece.

Officers: David Stevens (Chief Executive), Neil Cox (Director – Prevention and Protection), Rebecca Maher (Interim S151 Officer and Head of Finance), Lisa McNally (Director – Public Health), Surjit Tour (Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer), Charlie Davey (Business Partner – Adults), Steve Lilley (Finance Business Partner), Elaine Newsome (Service Manager - Democracy) and Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager).

16/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rollins.

17/21 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared at the meeting.

18/21 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.



Budget 2021/22 to 2023/24 – Provisional Settlement

The Cabinet, at its meeting on 10 February 2021, had referred the Budget 2021-22 to 2023-24 Provisional Settlement for consideration by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

Members were informed of the detail of the 2021/22 provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, which had been announced on 17 December 2020. The key headlines included:-

- core spending power for England councils had increased by 4.5%;
- the improved Better Care Fund remained at the same value as 2020/21;
- the Social Care Grant had increased nationally by £300m;
- the introduction of a new Lower Tier Services grant, financed from a reduction in New Homes Bonus;
- the Council Tax referendum cap at 2% with the ability to set an Adult Social Care precept up to 3% over the next two financial years;
- a further tranche of COVID-19 emergency funding;
- funding to cover 75% of irrecoverable Council Tax and Business Rates losses in 2020/21;
- a £670m Local Council Tax Support scheme to allow further support to those residents in financial difficulty;
- the continuation of the Troubled Families programme in 2021/22;
- an extra £125m new burdens funding for local authorities to provide safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse and their children;
- £15m to help with compliance with the recommendations of the Redmond Review of external audit.



The provisional settlement was broadly in line with the prudent planning assumptions set out in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. However, due to COVID-19, actions to address a number of budget pressures had not been possible during 2020/21 and therefore the expenditure budget for 2021/22 onwards had been adjusted to cover these additional costs.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- the Council's financial reserves at the end of 2019/2020 was approximately £42m;
- the Council was able to meet any short term projects in 2021/22 from earmarked balances;
- due to its prudent financial planning, the Council was not required to make any cuts to services during the 2021-22 financial year.

In response to concerns raised regarding the proposed increase in Council Tax by 2.99%, in view of the disruption of a number of services to residents due to COVID-19, the Cabinet Member for Resources and Core Services confirmed that the Cabinet had considered alternative options to the 2.99% increase, however, in order for the Council to avoid cuts to Council services from 2022/23, Council Tax would need to be increased this year. However, Sandwell had sought to avoid the steeper increase of 4.99% as being proposed by neighbouring authorities.

During the pandemic, the Council had still provided essential services, and used agency staff to continue with weekly bin collections, but had made the decision to temporarily cease garden waste collection to meet the backlog of recycling and refuse collection. The Board also acknowledged that whilst staff were off sick, their wages still had to be met by the Council.

It was noted that this was a difficult period for the Council and the Board sought reassurance from the Cabinet that they would do everything possible to avoid the long term disruption to Council services and endeavour to maintain services to the expected level for all Sandwell residents.



Resolved that Cabinet be requested to consider the comments and observations of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board in relation to Budget 2021/22 to 2023/24 – Provisional Settlement.

20/21

Corporate Plan 2020 - 2025 and Budget

The Cabinet, at its meeting on 10 February 2021, had referred the Corporate Plan - Big Plans for a Great Place 2020-2025 and budget for consideration by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

The Corporate Plan – Big Plans for a Great Place set out what the Council would do to deliver Vision 2030 and Sandwell’s 10 ambitions, over the period 2020 to 2025. The driving theme of the Corporate Plan was One Team: One Council which reflected the culture change that was being delivered through strong leadership in an open, honest and transparent environment.

The Council recognised that it would have to adapt its business structures and focus resources to deliver the strategic priorities through strengthening partnership working and developing strong links with local people and businesses to make sure the strategic priorities became a reality.

However, the pandemic had meant that focus was diverted to the initial response and establishing longer-term support mechanisms as the pandemic has continued into 2021.

The Council had responded to unprecedented challenges and had responded effectively to the emergency of the pandemic as one Council, establishing business continuity rapidly and calmly and had worked alongside partners to support the people of Sandwell.

At the same time, service delivery had continued where possible and had shifted several services to a digital platform where possible.



Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- the Council had learnt a lot from the pandemic in relation to engaging with partners and delivering front line services;
- front line services were being utilised more than ever, such as parks and green spaces, and it was hoped that this would continue to be the case post restrictions;
- implementing online and digital solutions had been key and would be monitored once restrictions were eased. This included online virtual meetings;
- continuing to listen to the community and develop services in the best way for them;
- the Council must continue to provide the most basic services to ensure residents had a clean and safe place to live and excellent parks and green spaces to use;
- there had been a lot of work taking place behind the scenes to respond to the pandemic that was placing pressure on services. This included paying out of grants to a number of people and contacting vulnerable residents, including an additional 9,000 residents identified this week to be included on the shielding list.

The Chair, on behalf of the Board, thanked Council officers for pulling together over a difficult twelve months and providing key services for vulnerable residents, including the food parcel service.

Resolved that Cabinet be requested to consider the comments and observations of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board in relation to Corporate Plan 2020 - 2025 and Budget.

Meeting ended at 6.34pm

To view the meeting, click [here](#)

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

