

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Tuesday, 8 February 2022 at 6.00 pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor L Giles (Chair)
Councillors Anandou, E M Giles and Moore

In attendance: Rashpal Bishop (Director of Adult Social Care), Neil Cox (Director of Business Strategy and Change), Charlie Davey (Adults Business Partner), Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Simone Hines (Director of Finance), Rebecca Maher (Head of Finance), Elaine Newsome (Service Manager – Democracy), Michael Jarrett (Director of Children & Education), Sue Stanhope (Interim Director of Human Resources), Surjit Tour (Director of Law & Governance), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager) and Matt Powis (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

Emma Taylor (Chief Executive - Sandwell Children's Trust);
Paul Chambers (Director of Finance - Sandwell Children's Trust);
Tara Malik (Director of Resources - Sandwell Children's Trust).

1/22 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

2/22 Declaration of Interest



There were no declarations of interest made.

3/22

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2021 are approved as a correct record.

4/22

Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

5/22

Budget Scrutiny Draft Budget 22-23

The Cabinet, at its meeting on 15 December 2021, had referred the draft budget 2022/23 for consideration by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

The Board was informed that approximately £16m in savings was required for 2022/23 to ensure a balanced and sustainable budget could be set whilst maintaining a prudent level of reserves. Savings proposals in principle had been identified in the sum of £14.6m which left a budget gap of approximately £1.4m.

The recent provisional Local Government Provisional Settlement set out the funding allocations for each local authority for 2022/23. Whilst the Council has benefited from extra funding through the settlement, particularly from the new Services Grant 22/23 and increased Social Care grants, much of this was ring-fenced for specific purposes or to cover increased costs, such as the increase in the employers National Insurance Contribution rate from April 2022 which was estimated to cost the Council £0.8m. The extremely high inflation rates in the UK had also meant that forecast costs for gas and electric had increased since the draft budget was prepared and there were also further inflationary increases on Adult Social Care and other large contracts.

The additional funding in the settlement would result in closing the £1.4m gap remaining in the draft budget, subject to the £14.6m of proposals that had already been identified being deliverable. However, as some of the funding streams for next year were one-off or time-limited, it was envisaged that there was a need for additional savings to be found in 2023/24.

In relation to Council Tax, the draft budget included a 3.99% increase based on a 2% 'core' increase and 1.99% Adult Social Care (ASC) precept carried forward from 2021/22 as the Council chose not to take the full ASC precept allowable this year. The provisional settlement confirmed that a further 1% Adult Social Care precept was permitted under the referendum limits. If approved, this would generate additional ongoing income of £1.1m for the Council. If the Council opted not to approve the additional 1%, the council tax income would be foregone on a permanent basis i.e. council tax income in future years would be £1.1m lower. If approved, the additional 1% Council Tax income would be targeted towards Adult Social Care and would assist the Council in meeting the increased costs of placements and ensure the social care market locally remains sustainable. This may be particularly important in future years if the one-off funding from 2022/23 was not continued in future settlements.

A final decision on Council Tax would be made by Cabinet at its meeting on 23 February for approval by Council on 1 March 2022.

In relation to the Sandwell Children's Trust, due to a number of pressures in the service, Cabinet would be recommended to consider allocating a sum of £70.47m which represented a 4% increase from 2021/22.

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

- in response to the proposal to develop an alternative approach to double handed care calls, it was reported that a training programme would be developed of all staff using the equipment within adult social care so as to have a single care approach for care home and residential settings;
- the Section 151 Officer assured the Board that the savings proposed were realistic and deliverable;
- whilst the Meals on Wheels service had declined in use during the peak of Covid-19, the data had not shown a continual decline in usage and therefore the service would continue to be provided;
- it was felt that further efficiency savings, above the £100k being proposed, could be identified within the fleet management service and felt that greater focus on this area was required, for e.g the introduction of a booking system for employees to book fleet to get the best use of resources.

The Director of Borough Economy was requested to look into the matter and respond;

- in relation to the proposal to reduce respite support from 56 days to 28 days, it was clarified that there were very few residents who required respite after 28 days but cases would be reviewed on an individual basis;
- it was still feasible to charge on council car parks as it continued to generate a surplus saving which was reinvested into highways;
- due to the significant rise in the cost of living, there would be additional pressures on the council's income streams and on the collection of tax, etc. However, there were a number of support mechanisms in place for residents and business' to access, for e.g. the 100% council tax reduction scheme;
- further consultation would be undertaken during the year on the council's residential charging policy which currently only collected 47% of what the Council could charge;
- the council's tax collection had improved from the year before and there had been a noticeable difference in people's pattern with more and more transactions being conducted online or by phone as opposed to face to face;
- a strategic savings plan for the council was required beyond the one year, however it was acknowledged that it was difficult to do at this point due to only having a 1 year financial settlement agreement and not knowing the full impact of covid on spending, for e.g. the future of markets and the high street with the increase in online shopping;
- the budget 22/23 proposals included an increase in reserves to ensure the council could address the inflation risks or in year fluctuations;
- a review was currently being undertaken on grants to the entire voluntary sector to understand value for money and impact of funding. A further update on the work would be reported to the Board;
- it was clarified that training to the council's workforce was not being reduced but options on how to deliver it were being considered to ensure cost efficiency, for e.g. e-learning as oppose to attending a conference;
- it was proposed that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities consider the issue of garage rents, looking at the occupancy rates and whether the advertising of garage space to generate rental income for the council was done well;

- it was proposed that the Board undertake a review of the Property Maintenance Account in order to consider a preventative rather than reactive approach;
- assurance from the Children's Trust was sought, following recommendations from the Grant Thornton governance review, on whether they would be in a position to meet their savings targets. In response, it was noted that the Trust were delivering over their medium term financial plan with a robust programme of improvements in place to deliver the proposed savings;
- the Director of Regeneration and Growth was requested to provide clarity on the proposed pre-application charges on planning.

The Chair, on behalf of the Board, thanked Directors and representatives of the Children's Trust for attending the meeting.

Resolved:-

- (1) that Cabinet be requested to consider the comments and observations of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board in relation to the Draft Budget 2022/23 as follows:-
 - (a) further efficiencies within the Fleet Management Services, for e.g the introduction of a booking system for employees to book fleet to get the best use of resources;
- (2) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board be requested to consider the cost effectiveness of garage rents, including the occupancy levels and whether advertising of space is done well;
- (3) that a review of the Property Maintenance Account is added to the work programme of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

6/22

Cabinet Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Management Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan as at the time of the meeting.

The Board requested that further clarification be given in relation to the item on the acquisition of the Kings Square, West Bromwich proposal.

Resolved that the Director of Regeneration and Growth provide further information to the Board on the proposal for the acquisition of the Kings Square, West Bromwich proposal.

7/22

Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme 2021-22

The Scrutiny Management Board noted its work programme for the remainder of the 2021-22 municipal year.

In relation to Minute No. 5/22 above, a further item would be added to the work programme on Property Maintenance Account.

Meeting ended at 7.09 pm

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