

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday 7 February 2024

Present:- Councillor Clark (in the Chair); Councillors Bacon, Baker-Rogers, Ball, Browne, Cooksey, Elliott, Pitchley, Tinsley and Yasseen.

Apologies for absence:- There were no apologies for absence.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

99. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 16 JANUARY 2024

Resolved: - That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 16 January 2024 be approved as a true record.

100. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

101. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from the public or press.

102. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no exempt items.

103. BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2024/25

The Chair invited the Leader of the Council to introduce the report. Also in attendance was the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhood Workings and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Community Safety and Finance.

Also present were the Chief Executive; the Strategic Director for Finance and Customer Services and Assistant Director of Financial Services; the Strategic Director for Adult Care, Housing and Public Health; the Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment; and the Acting Assistant Director of Early Help and Business Support (representing the Strategic Director for Children and Young People's Services).

The report proposed the Council's Budget and Council Tax for 2024/25, based on the Council's Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25, budget consultation and the consideration of Directorate budget proposals. A review of the financial planning assumptions within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) had also been undertaken.

The proposed Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy reflected the Council's priorities as set out in the Council Plan 2022-2025 and Year Ahead Delivery Plan. The development of the Budget proposals for 2024/25 and the further update of the MTFS had taken into account prevailing economic factors and demand pressures, notably inflation remaining significantly high during 2023/24 and its impact on market pressures for CYPS placements, food prices for schools catering and increased base costs across Council services, along with significant increased demand for Home to School Transport. Following the Council's technical MTFS updates and the impact of the Provisional Financial Settlement the Council had been able to propose a balanced budget for 2024/25 and faced a projected, potential £6.6m funding gap in 2025/26.

In setting the Budget, the Council maintained a focus on mitigating any adverse impact on residents as far as possible, ensuring the protection of basic services in order to support the community through a continuing cost of living crisis. In addition, the Budget provided some additional investments to help support people and delivering the Council's ambitions for the Borough with specific regard to the environment and being family friendly.

In recognition of escalating cost pressures relating to inflation, transitions and rising demand for the service, the report proposed approximately £7.5m of additional funding to support the delivery of Adult Social Care services.

In setting the proposed 2024/25 budget, Cabinet would recommend to Council a 3.5% increase in Council Tax, made up of an increase of 1.5% in the Council's basic Council Tax plus an increase of 2% for the Adult Social Care precept.

The Leader of the Council outlined that because of previous budgetary decisions, the presented budget proposed a comparatively low increase in Council Tax compared to many other authorities in the country.

It was noted that directorates were working towards a balanced budget position, which would require a small use of reserves over the next two years. However, in 2025/26, there was a projected budget gap of approximately £6.6 million.

The Strategic Director for Finance and Customer Services added that there was some uncertainty about future local government funding. However, in setting the budget, risks had been identified and mitigated, details of which were outlined in the report. Treasury Management decisions had generated additional income which had been added to reserves. Assurance was given in her capacity as the Section 151 Officer, that the proposed budget was robust and safe.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board and a discussion on the following issues ensued:

- The challenge of setting a balanced budget in light of financial austerity and economic conditions and the prudent choices the Council had taken financially were noted. Given these financial challenges, the additional investments were welcomed.
- Clarification was sought on the Council Tax support available to low-income households. In response, it was outlined that approximately 14,000 working age households would receive Council Tax top up and of these, approximately for 10,000 this would cover the Council Tax bill entirely. It was noted that for those residents in parish areas, parish precepts would not be covered.
- It was noted that the Government had reduced grant support to councils, with the expectation that business rate and Council Tax receipts would address the funding gap.
- In reference to previous year's savings, clarification was sought if these would be achieved. It was outlined that there had been a delay in disposing of some assets, however the Strategic Director for Finance and Customer Services was confident that these would be delivered by the end of the current year.
- The extent of budget savings since 2010 and their impact on services were noted. It was noted that the flexibility to make discretionary budget decisions had diminished. The Council would continue to deliver statutory services such as social care provision and refuse collection. However, it would not be possible to meet all expectations because resources were limited.
- It was noted that the report referred to complexities faced by the health and care system. It was outlined that the ageing population, with people living with long-term conditions; delays in treatment; staffing pressures; and the impact of the pandemic were all contributory factors. It was clarified that the budget allocated would address some of the risks. It was noted that Central Government had allocated additional funding, however if these funds were not continued, the service would face considerable pressures.
- It was clarified that there were no savings proposals in this budget round. The savings outlined had been agreed in previous years and were on track to be delivered.
- Further details were sought on amount charged in Council Tax since the start of the Council's term (2021). The Leader of the Council outlined that each year of the term, and in the preceding two years, Council Tax had been increased by less than the Government's referendum threshold. It was outlined that the reduction in Central Government funding had meant that local councils had to raise Council Tax bills to meet this funding gap.
- Concerns were expressed about the use of Council resources, how performance was being managed in specific services and if the proposed investments were justified. In response, using the

example of contact centres, it was highlighted that investments in staffing and capacity had improved performance and customer satisfaction.

- In respect of previous years savings, it was clarified that Finance and Customer Services had secured additional efficiencies by getting better value from IT contracts.

The Chair invited the Leader of the Council to outline proposals concerning Fees and Charges.

It was outlined that the Council had a policy to increase fees and charges to ensure that services which the Council provided were kept broadly in line with increases in the cost. The proposal was fees and charges would be uplifted by 6% (unless an exception was applied). These were detailed in paragraph 2.3.3 of the report.

The Chair invited questions and comments from Board members:

- In respect of the proposed fee increase of 15% for school catering, clarification was sought as to the cost the local authority should this not be passed onto schools. It was outlined that the projected cost was in the region of £750,000. It was also explained that schools had the discretion of purchasing the service from the local authority or from another provider.
- Concerns were raised about the impact of the increase in school meal prices particularly in respect of those household who were slightly above the threshold for free school meals. It was outlined that families who fall outside the means test thresholds may benefit from additional Council Tax support and other measures put in place to support low-income households.
- Details are asked at the outcomes of consultation with schools about the proposed increase in fees. It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing.
- In respect of taxi licensing, clarification was sought on MOT requirements. It was outlined that the review of the Licensing Policy had determined that the current frequency of testing should be maintained. In mitigation, agreement had been reached with the taxi trade that older vehicles could be used if they met the agreed standards. A query was raised whether the use of bus and cycle lanes could be extended to taxi drivers in line with some other local authorities. The Leader of the Council confirmed that he would examine the issue further.

The Chair invited Leader of the Council to introduce proposed Revenue Budget Investments, outlined in detail in Appendix 2 of the report.

The proposals delivered by Children and Young People Services Directorate (linked to the Council Plan theme 'Every Child Able to Fulfil their Potential') were outlined.

In respect of the early help proposals, it was intended that these would improve the Council's universal offer and provide flexibility in services across early help and social care. This would add capacity to increase the reach of the offer to under-fives across the borough; commission universal youth services and increase outreach and engagement resources; and improve the effectiveness of initial contact with families to ensure they received the right help at the right time from a range of agencies. Details were provided of the baby pack scheme; the scheme would be universally available for all babies and new parents to promote a fair and equal start for all children and access to universal and targeted provision in localities. The concept of the pack was to facilitate proactive engagement with young families from birth, making sure that families had the essentials in the first few weeks and months of life.

The Acting Assistant Director for Early Help and Business Support reiterated that the introduction of baby packs was intended to facilitate early engagement with families and provide relevant information (e.g. safe sleeping campaigns). It was established that families which received early intervention and support were less likely to require statutory intervention as they grow older.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board:

- The investment in universal early help services across the borough was welcomed. Further details were requested on how equitable access to services would be delivered, particularly in those localities which did not have access to family hubs. It was outlined that outreach services would be delivered within communities: an example was given of engagement with young people. It was also highlighted the activities and services will be delivered in buildings belonging to partners.
- A question was raised whether the baby packs would be means tested. It was clarified that this was a universal offer, available to all families as means testing often acted as a barrier and made it more difficult for families to access services. The premise behind the proposal was that the service was engaging directly with families from day one and if the service was not needed by a family, the service would not be accessed.
- Clarification was sought whether an analysis had been undertaken on whether the baby packs provided value for money and if families on very high incomes would take up the offer, possibly at detriment to those in greater need. It was established that an income distribution analysis had not taken place, however there were relatively few people on the high wages cited who lived in the borough. It was intended that the process would be as simple as possible so as not to put off applicants through bureaucracy. It was anticipated that this would enable all families to have the opportunity to engage with local universal services.

- Details was sought about how the impact of the investment in baby packs would be monitored and reported. It was clarified that this would take place. Data was collected on the numbers attending Children Centres, alongside ongoing monitoring of numbers of children in need and looked after children. The impact of this initiative would be measured in the long-term.
- It was outlined that conversations have taken place with families through Children Centres to establish what would be helpful and make a difference to them, especially in the first few weeks. The offer was in line with the recent Government policy “Stable Homes, Built on Love”.
- Further comments were made welcoming the proposals; in particular, the ability of new parents to access advice and support in a non-stigmatising way. It was noted that this would be of benefit to new parents regardless of their income-level.

The proposals delivered by the Adult Care, Housing and Public Health Directorate (linked to the Council Plan theme ‘People are Safe, Healthy and Live Well’) were outlined.

Reference was made to the pressures experienced in Homelessness Services. The proposal outlined an investment in homelessness prevention and managing temporary accommodation pressures. To highlight the scale of the problem, it was noted that almost 160 homeless households were temporarily accommodated in Rotherham during December and the service received over 2500 service requests per week. This level of demand was comparable with that experienced by other local authorities.

There were two strands to the proposal: the first being the provision of support alongside probation services in accommodation for individuals exiting custody. This cohort often had a complex range of issues and struggled to maintain tenancy without intensive support, leading to substantial pressures on the service if unaddressed. The second part of the proposal involved the provision of targeted support and for people in temporary accommodation.

The second investment proposal concerns bringing empty homes back into use. The third investment proposal was to support the new CQC regulatory and inspection arrangements for adult social care and coordinate the work across the service.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board:

- Further details were asked about what steps would be taken if an individual presented as homeless, the length of time to access emergency accommodation and how the proposed investment would help the process. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhood Working outlined that the

response depended on the particular circumstances of the case and presenting need (e.g medical conditions et cetera).

- In the case of rough sleepers, it was outlined that the Council would try to source emergency accommodation on the same day that the individual presented.
- Concerns were expressed about the use of hotels as temporary accommodation, particularly for women with children, including those who may have suffered domestic abuse.
- Clarification was sought about how empty homes could be brought back into use and if developers could be incentivised to increase the numbers returned to use. It was noted that empty homes were privately owned and therefore not council assets.
- Further details were asked about what support Council tenants received to help them stay in their properties and mitigate the risk of homelessness. It was highlighted that a report would be submitted to the February meeting of Council detailing proposals. This had been considered by the Board at its previous meeting.
- Concerns were expressed at the expense of using hotels as temporary accommodation. It was noted that there had been a spike in homelessness numbers that mirrored the national trend. The Council's intention was to support people to stay in sustainable tenancies and provide more affordable homes.

The proposals delivered by the Regeneration and Environment Directorate (linked to the Council plan themes 'People are Safe, Healthy and Live Well' (1); 'Expanding Economic Opportunity' (1) and a 'Cleaner, Greener Environment' (3) were outlined.

The Restorative Hate Crime Service provided an early intervention and prevention approach to tackling hate crime/incidents. This initiative was previously funded by the Community Safety Partnership. The proposal was to increase the capacity of the provider Remedi by 33% and put service on a more sustainable basis.

The proposal entitled Community Wealth Building was focused on providing support to increase employer ownership across the borough. It supported the delivery of the Council's Social Value Policy and also formed a complimentary part of the Council's wider approach to creating a more inclusive economy. The proposal would enable the delivery of targeted activity within the Borough to promote and increase employee ownership.

In respect of the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) proposals, it was outline that the Council had a new statutory duty to administer BNG as a planning requirement within the Environment Act 2021. It had been identified by both planning and green spaces services that demand and work would increase as a result of the new duty. The aim of the proposal was to increase capacity to allow the Council to meet its new BNG

responsibilities.

In respect of the proposals around Principal Towns Cleansing, it was noted that there had been an increase footfall across areas of the borough which are benefiting from regeneration schemes, Towns and Villages Funding and wider capital investment to enhance local communities. The proposals would increase the cleansing and maintenance operations; provide evening and weekend cover; maintain new and/or enhanced public spaces and provide a cleaner greener town centre to visit and work in.

With regards to the Tree Service Improvements, the proposals were intended to ensure that the service was meeting good practice standards as well as legislative requirements. The additional investment was needed to sustain the service at the new level and make improvements to response time and faults rectified through proactive inspections.

The proposal to reduce the price of the Bulky Waste Service to residents was outlined. The proposal was to seek a 50% reduction on the current charge to residents who use the service, with a further reduction for Rothercard holders. It was anticipated that this would drive up demand for the service to encourage more residents to use the trusted and efficient service available and reduce fly tipping.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board:

- Further details were requested on how Community Wealth Building would work in practice and if it applied to sole traders. A further question was asked about how the initiative would be communicated to black and minority ethnic communities and across the wider borough. It was outlined that the initiative was typically aimed at slightly larger organisations. The intention was to generate wealth and encourage local businesses to win contracts with the council.
- In respect of the Bulky Waste proposals, details were sought if this would be extended to churches. The Leader of the Council stated that he would be happy to look at this question.
- Clarification was requested if enforcement activity around fly tipping would be maintained. This was confirmed.
- Further details were requested on how the impact of the Restorative Hate Crime Service and Community Wealth Building would be measured and communicated to Members. The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment explained that data was gathered with regards to hate crime/incident reoffending rates and metrics would be developed on community wealth and employee ownership which would be reflected in performance information. The Chief Executive confirmed that the performance information regarding hate crime initiative is outlined in the Rotherham Safer

Partnerships annual report.

- In terms of the investments related to street cleaning, tree services and bulky waste collections, if the proposals were approved, consideration would be given to how improvements were communicated to residents.
- Details was sought if town cleansing would benefit all wards. It was confirmed that this should be the case however, priority had been given to areas of higher footfall. Members were invited to feedback where improvements could be made to services. The Chief Executive outlined that comparisons had been made with national good practice on street cleansing. Capital investments had also been made to improve the efficiencies of the service including equipment, contact centre and website.
- In respect of the Restorative Hate Crime Service, clarification was sought between what constituted freedom of speech and a hate crime. It was outlined that the police investigated where crimes have taken place and also recorded what was defined as 'hate incidents'. The Home Office had issued guidance on the recording of hate crime/incidents. The investment proposals were based on national good practice and the requirement for community safety partnership to respond to and address hate crime/incidents and reduce tensions in the local area.

The proposals delivered by the Finance and Customer Services Directorate (linked to the Council plan theme 'One Council Approach') were outlined.

Temporary funding was allocated for additional call handling posts within the customer contact centre, resulting in reductions in average call waiting times. The positive feedback had been from customers about these improvements. The proposal was to make this function permanent and continue to reduce call waiting times. Alongside this, there was a proposal to improve the digital customer experience to develop the Council's online offer and ensure that it was responsive, easy to access and connected better with back-office functions.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board:

- Concerns were expressed about the necessity of the investment proposals, particularly those linked to digital design. In response, an example was given around bulky waste collection and how back-office systems had been streamlined to improve services. It was highlighted that the recent LGA peer review recommended that the Council reviewed where the pace of transformation could be accelerated. It was envisaged that the proposals would ensure that services would be delivered to customers more quickly and create savings. In addition, the services would be able to keep pace with technological advances to ensure that services remained

fit for purpose and value for money.

- Details were sought whether sickness levels were monitored for this group of staff and if the cost of Internet was paid for staff working from home. It was confirmed that sickness was monitored across the directorate and there were no concerns about levels in Digital Services. It was also confirmed that the internet was not paid for homeworking, unless there was a contractual obligation (in line with Council policy).

The Chair invited the Leader of the Council to outline Capital Investment Proposals.

The Capital Strategy and proposed Capital Programme to 2027/28 ensured that the investment decisions were clearly aligned with the Council's strategic priorities, vision for Rotherham and the Council Plan. The Council's strategy and programme to 2025/26 had been further refreshed and updated as part of this budget report and reporting to Cabinet and Council carried out during 2023/24. These were outlined in Appendix 3A to 3F of the report.

Details of the following programs were outlined:

- Working with Rotherham Parents Carers Forum, the development of a special educational needs and disabilities hub in the town centre.
- A major upgrade of children's playgrounds costing in the region of £1 million, including the replacement of the water splash play area at Clifton Park.
- Additional investments of the next two years in a programme of public realm improvements through the places fund to improve the quality of place across the borough and inspire greater pride in neighbourhoods.
- Continued investment in the road network, to improve roads, footways and highways drainage. This will be complemented by a £400k investment to improve road safety.
- Further investment in flood defences to make the borough more resilient to a changing climate (£9.8 million), with further consideration given to what measures were required to protect the Catcliffe community from the devastating impact of flooding.
- Support to the natural environment and facilities; including improvements to footpaths in Thrybergh Country Park to mitigating the impact of ash dieback and effectively manage trees.
- Additional investment would be made to equipment to support Principal Towns Cleansing.
- Support would also be given to the digitalisation of the local studies service and archives and software to support street pride services.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board:

- Clarification was sought if the 'Our Place investments would prioritise areas not eligible for Towns and Villages Fund. It was confirmed that a policy paper would be submitted in due course which would detail eligibility criteria.
- Details were requested about reasonable expectations concerning the maintenance or repair of assets. It was outlined that this was dependent on the nature of the asset. For buildings, the life-cycle was much longer however for vehicles or other equipment this would be relatively short. It was highlighted that the Clifton Park water splash had been in use over 15 years and therefore was probably towards the end of its life-cycle and would require replacement.
- In relation to the Towns and Villages Funds, how would the funds be allocated. It was outlined that the funding was ring fenced.
- Clarification was sought about the quality of materials used in footpath repairs and if this provided value for money. It was highlighted that the materials used were industry recognised standard. There was a programme of inspections on completed works. The service welcomed Member feedback regarding resident comments on the quality of repairs.

The Chair invited questions and comments on the remainder of the report not covered in previous discussions:

- In relation to the Community Leadership Fund (CLF), had consideration been given to adopting a tiered approach which took account of local factors: for example, higher deprivation or greater representation of the voluntary and community sector. It was confirmed that there was no intention to adopt a different approach.
- Details were also sought whether the CLF should be used to purchase equipment to support the delivery of Council priorities or projects. It was confirmed that the CLF was intended to support ward members to address ward priorities and tackle issues that residents raise. The budget allocated to CLF was to address the additional issues raised in wards rather than operational matters.
- The level of participation in the budget consultation was noted, particularly the low-level of partner response. It was highlighted that this could be taken as there being no concerns with the proposals outlined and their impact on services. The Chief Executive committed to raising this at the next partnership meeting. It was asked if consideration could be given to widening access by providing paid-for return envelopes at venues such as libraries.
- Clarification was sought on the added value of the carbon impact assessment in relation to strategic documents such as the budget.

The Chief Executive outlined that the forthcoming Climate Change annual report would detail the work underway to improve carbon literacy. It was noted that there were investments in the budget which would support the work on biodiversity.

- Concerns were expressed on the uncertainty of the Household Support Fund and if this would continue in the future. The withdrawal of schemes to provide food vouchers for children eligible for free school meals during school holidays, local Council Tax support and discretionary housing payments would have an impact on low-income households and families.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council, Cabinet Members and members of the Senior Leadership Team for their attendance.

Resolved:

- 1) That a report on the impact and take-up of the baby pack scheme be submitted to OSMB (or nominated select commission) at a future point when meaningful data has been gathered.
- 2) That consideration is given to the use of bus lanes and gates for the use of licensed taxis.
- 3) That Cabinet be informed that the following recommendations be supported:

That Cabinet recommend to Council:

1. Approval of the Budget and Financial Strategy for 2024/25 as set out in the report and appendices, including a basic Council Tax increase of 1.5% and an Adult Social Care precept of 2%.
2. Approval of the extension to the Local Council Tax Support Top Up scheme, that will provide up to £121.96 of additional support to low income households most vulnerable to rising household costs, through reduced Council Tax bills as described in section 2.5.11-14.
3. Approval of the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2025/26, as described within section 2.6.
4. Approval of the Reserves Strategy as set out in Section 2.8 noting that the final determination of Reserves will be approved as part of reporting the financial outturn for 2023/24.
5. To note and accept the comments and advice of the Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services (Section 151 Officer), provided in compliance with Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, as to the robustness of the estimates included in the Budget and the adequacy of reserves for which the Budget provides (Section 2.14).
6. To note the feedback from the public and partners following

the public consultation on the Council's budget for 2024/25 which took place from 8 December 2023 to 14 January 2024, attached as Appendix 4.

7. Approval of the proposed increases in Adult Social Care provider contracts and for Personal Assistants as set out in Section 2.4.
8. Approval of the revenue investment proposals set out in Section 2.7 and Appendix 2.
9. Approval of the Council Fees and Charges for 2024/25 attached as Appendix 7.
10. Application of the Business Rates Reliefs as set out in Section 2.10, in line with Government guidance.
11. Approval of the proposed Capital Strategy and Capital Programme as presented in Section 2.12 and Appendices 3A to 3F.
12. Approval of the Treasury Management matters for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 9 of this report including the Prudential Indicators, the Minimum Revenue Provision Policy, the Treasury Management Strategy and the Investment Strategy.
13. Approval of the Flexible use of Capital Receipts Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 5).
14. Approval that any changes resulting from the Final Local Government Finance Settlement 2024/25 be reflected in the Budget and Council Tax Report to Council on 28 February.
15. Continuation of the principles and measures adopted since April 2020 to make faster payments to suppliers on receipt of goods, works and services following a fully reconciled invoice as described in section 2.11.
16. Approval of the Budget allocations for the Community Leadership Fund as set out in section 2.9.
17. Approval that the Capital Programme Budget continues to be managed in line with the following key principles:
 - (i) Any underspends on the existing approved Capital Programme in respect of 2023/24 be rolled forward into future years, subject to an individual review of each carry forward to be set out within the Financial Outturn 2023/24 report to Cabinet.
 - (ii) In line with Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules 7.7 to 7.11 and 8.12, any successful grant applications in respect of capital projects will be added to the Council's approved Capital Programme on an ongoing basis.
 - (iii) Capitalisation opportunities and capital receipts flexibilities will be maximised, with capital receipts earmarked to minimise revenue costs.

104. WORK PROGRAMME

The Board considered its Work Programme.

Resolved: - That the Work Programme be approved.

105. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS

This item was deferred.

106. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Board considered the Forward Plan of Key Decisions 1 February 2024 to 30 April 2024 (as published on the Council's website and circulated by email).

Resolved: - That the Forward Plan be noted.

107. CALL-IN ISSUES

There were no call-in issues.

108. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items.

109. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved: - That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board will be held at 10am on Wednesday 13 March 2024 at Rotherham Town Hall.