



Buckinghamshire Council

Finance & Resources Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 22 JULY 2021 IN THE OCLUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, HP19 8FF - AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.52 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

R Bagge (Chairman), K Wood (Vice-Chairman), K Ashman, S Chhokar, T Egleton, G Harris, I Macpherson, M Walsh, S Wilson and N Hussain

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

T Butcher, J Chilver and M Tett

Agenda Item

1 CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed all those in attendance and those members of the public watching the webcast. Committee Members were invited to introduce themselves.

2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

The Chairman appointed Councillor K Wood as Vice-Chairman of the Finance and Resources Select Committee for the 2021-22 municipal year.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor K Wood be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Finance and Resources Select Committee for the ensuing year.

3 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies had been received from Councillors M Ayub, D Antony, D Goss, J Ng and W Raja. Councillor N Hussain attended as a substitute for Councillor W Raja.

4 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

5 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The minutes of the meetings held on 25 March 2021 and 26 May 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

6 PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Martin Tett, Leader of the Council and Councillor John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources to the meeting to present their priorities for the year ahead. The presentation slides can be seen attached to the agenda pack.

Councillor M Tett, Leader, provided an oversight of the Council's budget commitments and highlighted his priorities:

- Usually the Council would develop a medium term financial plan over a four year period, however when the Government abandoned its normal comprehensive spending review, a one year revenue budget for 2021-22 had been adopted by the Council. The Council did however have a four year capital programme of £570m in place to give some certainty to longer term projects building assets.
- From the £1.2bn budget last year, there had been a £400,000 underspend which was a significant achievement.
- After Q1 of 2021/22, an overspend of £500,000 had been forecast for this year.
- A £105m overall road programme had been agreed by the Council and a commitment had already been made to spend an additional £4m on drainage (totalling £8m). An additional £400,000 had been included in the budget this year to tackle street cleaning and litter and more investment was made into planning enforcement, as this service was valued by residents.
- Members wanted to support the development of housing that was affordable in Buckinghamshire and the potential to utilise sites in the Council's own estate was being investigated.
- The Council had a statutory duty to continue support for vulnerable children and adults. The pandemic had seen a noticeable increase in demand and complexity on these services, which could lead to budget pressures this year.
- The impact of infrastructure projects, such as HS2 and East-West Rail, would be monitored despite limited funding from the construction organisations. £500,000 had been committed by the Council to help residents engage with these projects.
- £172m had been obtained for Aylesbury from the Housing Infrastructure Fund.
- Risks to the outlined priorities included the level of national Government debt, the levelling up agenda, the fair funding review, changes to the adult social precept and the tapering of new homes bonus. These significant unknowns made it challenging for the Council to plan its finances effectively.

In response to members' questions and during the subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- The Council had already delivered £2.5m two years ago through senior management restructure and a further £13m savings were included in this year's budget. Some of these would be difficult to deliver due to the impact of Covid 19, but savings would be realised over the longer term.
- Service reviews were ongoing as part of the Better Buckinghamshire programme.
- The Council may adopt a policy of agile working whereby homeworking arrangements would depend on the service and job role. This would develop over time.
- £166m had been distributed by the Council to businesses across Buckinghamshire. The Council had shaped its £21m Additional Restrictions Grant to help businesses that had not been eligible for central Government funding (e.g. sole traders). Buckinghamshire Council was ranked second in the country for distributing its grants during the pandemic.

- The Leader worked closely with the Buckinghamshire MPs who lobby regarding funding and also worked with the County Councils Network and the LGA to lobby Government.
- Virtual meetings had been useful during the pandemic and would have a place in future however physical meetings offered improved team building and networking.
- Broadband was viewed as a household essential. The Government planned to spend £5bn on upgrading the country's digital infrastructure through its launch of Project Gigabit. Buckinghamshire Council's recovery bid to Government had asked for £60m which would go towards high capacity connections. The Leader had met with the Digital Minister, Matt Warman, who was interested to discuss pilot schemes for broadband provision in rural areas of Buckinghamshire. Buckinghamshire had one of the lowest penetrations of high capacity internet connection in England, so progress in this area was crucial but would be dependent on Government funding.
- The Council was working closely with the Department of Work and Pensions to try and match job seekers to roles in a more meaningful way in Buckinghamshire and the Council was supporting apprenticeships to help young people get a start on the career ladder. The Council had some hard to fill posts due to national shortages of planners and qualified social workers and had used agency workers to cover vacancies. Social media campaigns had successfully attracted job applicants, for example, a number of posts in the crematorium team had been filled recently.

Councillor John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources, highlighted the following priorities over the upcoming year:

- The target was to save £34m in the next four years with £13m of this aimed to be achieved this year.
- The Council was on track to deliver its unitary council business case saving of £18m. The remaining £16m were associated with specific portfolio savings and these would be considered during the budget building process in the Autumn.
- The Better Buckinghamshire programme was set to deliver £1.7m savings this year with a lot originating from the Deputy Chief Executive Directorate.
- Contract and procurement harmonisation aimed to deliver £2.7m savings which was in part due to the increased purchasing power of the unitary authority.
- A single revenues and benefits system, Northgate, would go live in December 2021 and would deliver savings of £700,000 over two years. Additionally, the Wycombe customer service centre would be insourced, creating a saving of over £250,000 this year as well as delivering a consistent and integrated customer experience.
- A single, fully integrated council website was planned as the legacy websites were still linked to the unitary council's front page. Completion of this was aimed for March 2022. The development plan for this project would be available by September this year.
- There would be an Annual Fees and Charges review and a review of existing and proposed property income projections and opportunities was also underway. The targets were on track for this year. The Council also generated approximately £2m per year from offering services to schools in the county.
- Delivery of the Customer First strategy. Part of this included a single telephony system to improve efficiency and the roll out of Council Access Points with one in each Community Board area.
- The Deputy Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Tim Butcher, updated the Committee on some improvements made for customers contacting the Council by telephone.

In response to members' questions the following points were noted:

- The acquisition of Friars Square cost £12m and was supported by professional advice from two independent surveyors. Due diligence had been carried out regarding surveys of the asset and the robustness of tenancies. The acquisition was not primarily motivated by a desire to generate income but would assist the Council in the regeneration of Aylesbury town centre as part of the Aylesbury Garden Town programme.
- Six of the seven customer KPIs were being achieved. Customer call waiting time was just outside the benchmark target, due to average waiting times being around three minutes. It was hoped the new telephone system would help with reducing the wait time.
- The new council website aimed to inherit the best parts from each legacy website – Members were concerned that the search function did not work well currently. Members were welcome to take part in regular show and tell sessions on the website to keep updated on the programme. Members agreed this piece of work should be a priority.
- Member input for the Customer First programme would be sought by the Deputy Cabinet Member in a Task & Finish Group in August.
- Carrying out zero-based budgeting on the council's £1.2bn would be a significant task and require substantial resource. Richard Ambrose, S151 Officer, would update the committee at the next meeting around the approach that would be followed to build the budget for the coming year, when he reported back on progress of the Budget Scrutiny recommendations from February 2021.
- The impact of the pandemic on office working space and home working would be measured in an integrated study which would feed into the work space strategy. This would take some time to complete. Some sites in Wycombe, Amersham and Aylesbury had already been partially rented out to generate income.

The Chairman thanked the Leader, Cabinet Member and Deputy Cabinet Member for attending the meeting.

7 BUDGET PERFORMANCE MONITORING Q1

Councillor John Chilver, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources presented the Q1 Budget Monitoring Report which had been presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 20 July. Councillor J Chilver summarised the report which reflected the business as usual and Covid pressures faced during that period.

After allowing for £4.9m of mitigations laid out in the report, the forecast was a £0.5m overspend. This was made up of £1.4m adverse variance on Covid related spend and £0.9m favourable variation on business as usual. By portfolios, the largest overspends were on Culture & Leisure and Transport. The Capital Forecast report showed £3m slippage, which was 1.6% of the total capital budget, with main areas of slippage being flood defence schemes and work on Marlow Bridge.

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- One Member was concerned that slippage on ICT projects would impact service delivery and the Customer First programme.
- There was a £2m corporate contingency built into the budget, which Scrutiny had previously recommended, that had the potential to offset increased demand in Children's Services due to Covid. This would become clearer in the Autumn.
- The Council had not lost any food and beverage tenancies during the pandemic. It was

hoped that these sectors would recover following the removal of restrictions.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report and the officers for their contributions.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee was invited to put forward suggestions for the 2021/22 work programme. The Committee was advised that suggestions made would be developed in to a work programme in consultation with the Chairman and Cabinet Members. The work programme would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting for agreement.

Suggestions made by the Committee included:

- Future updates on the customer service and customer first projects as well as IT infrastructure behind these projects.
- Better Buckinghamshire programme.
- The amalgamation of contracts and procurements.
- Property strategy and its link with the home working policy.
 - Two Members added that working from home had added environmental benefits which would assist in the council's climate change targets.
- The council's overall strategy on home working.
- The council's external property management companies.
- The administrative efficiencies of Community Boards.
- Considering the effective use of Council Access Points on a 'cost per transaction' basis.
- Re-consider key planning assumptions and base data, such as demographics, that informs policies such as the Local Plan and those linked with adult social care.

9 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be on Thursday 14 October 2021 at 2pm. The Chairman also advised that the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry was scheduled to take place from 10 – 14 January 2022.