



Buckinghamshire Council

Finance & Resources Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.28 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

R Bagge, M Walsh, M Ayub, M Bracken, D Dhillon, G Harris, I Macpherson, R Newcombe, C Oliver and S Wilson

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

T Ellis, S Keyes, S Murphy-Brookman, R Shovell, D Skinner and C Ward

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Cllrs Butcher, Chhokar, Dixon and Fayyaz.

The Chairman noted that Cllr Anthony had resigned from the Council and expressed his thanks for Cllr Anthony's diligent contribution to the committee.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5th October 2023 were confirmed as an accurate record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were none.

5 BUDGET MONITORING Q2 2023/24

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Martin Tett, Leader, Cllr John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources and David Skinner, Director of Finance to the meeting.

The Leader introduced the report, making the following key points:

- The Council had taken finances very seriously and when the 2023-24 Budget had come before the Full Council, it had taken account areas of risk.
- There was an adverse variance of £15.2 million across all portfolios with a net overspend of £8.6m after taking account of corporate items.

- The main areas of spend were Children's Services, Adult Social Care, temporary accommodation and transport for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Every council of a similar size had been struggling to find the budget for statutory services. The Leader had written to Government Ministers to raise his concerns about cost pressures.
- Action plans had been implemented across all portfolios.

Questions from Select Committee Members were invited. During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- Proposals on the redevelopment of the King George V office in Amersham would be presented to Cabinet shortly and a formal decision would be made. Savings had also been made by consolidating office accommodation, considering the termination of the Capswood office lease and moving out of the Old Library at High Wycombe and the Easton Street offices.
- The reduction of the Climate Change budget from £35 million to £30 million had been due to several factors, including the variability of the income from the Energy from Waste (EfW) plant.
- Members may want to interrogate further the Community Safety variance during the Budget Scrutiny session with the Cabinet Member for Communities in January. Budget reconciliation had been an ongoing exercise and the debt collection process standardised, leading to synergies being realised. For Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments, bills had been raised once everything had been agreed. The trigger point for debt recovery action had been the enforcement date. Dates had sometimes moved as housing projects were completed.
- Out of county placements for children with special needs had provoked discussion and interest from the media and the general public. In some cases, Local Authorities had been bidding against each other for places. Providers of specialist children's services had been able to command high fees. The Council had been developing in-house provision, three places had been provided and another ten places were planned. Each of the facilities accommodated a small number of children.
- The budgets for the last two years had been very challenging but income from investments and income generated from the EfW site had helped balance the budget. £4.8 million had been drawn down from the EfW reserve with around £10 million remaining at the start of the year. The EfW income may help balance the budget in future however this reserve was finite and subject to the volatility of energy prices. Cabinet would continue to monitor this situation.
- Members noted the positive results achieved by the Heath & Wellbeing portfolio and encouraged best practice be shared. In such a huge portfolio, small percentage savings had resulted in a significant positive impact on the budget.
- Details of additions and re-profiling of £24 million into future years were given on page 47 of the Cabinet paper. Additional projects had been funded by Government grants and section 106 payments. Some projects had experienced significant delays such as the South East Aylesbury Link Road (SEALR) and the Future High Streets programme. For the SEALR, approval had been sought from HS2 and Homes England. This approval had been given and the project was able to progress. All the Government-funded spend on the Future High Streets programme in High Wycombe had needed to be profiled for March 2024. The project had been re-shaped as some of the planned work had been funded by the private sector. A project was underway to use the remaining government funding.

- The Aylesbury Grid replacement project had been delayed whilst a suitable location was sought. The work would now be completed by UK Power Networks rather than the Council. Most of the funding would be re-allocated.
- To provide temporary accommodation for homeless residents, leases had been extended on Saunderton Lodge and Bridge Court in High Wycombe. Two additional properties had been acquired – one in Aylesbury and another in High Wycombe. The Council was actively seeking new properties to provide more accommodation.
- Where children needed specialist care, there was competition to secure it from providers. Each case would be carefully assessed to identify potential savings.
- There was an increasing challenge with elderly residents living in care homes who had been funding their own care but had depleted their funds. In these cases, families had put pressure on the Council to fund the resident to remain in the same care home. Rising costs in this area would pose a future risk to the Council.
- The Council provided a number of statutory services which were subject to inspection by Government agencies. The agencies were disregarded Council budgets, deciding what should be provided to residents irrespective of the costs involved.

6 ICT ONE PROGRAMME AND AURA

The Chairman welcomed Sarah Murphy-Brookman, Corporate Director for Resources, Tony Ellis, IT Service Director and Rachel Shovell, Aura Programme Director to the meeting.

ICT ONE Programme

The Cabinet Member for Resources gave a short introduction to the ICT ONE report, making the following points:

- Consolidating all the Council's IT systems would bring savings and provide a single, modern platform for the Council.
- The programme would be completed in 2025.
- Project AURA aimed to integrate core finance and HR processes with estimated savings of £2.6 million.

The IT Service Director summarised the project, noting the following:

- The unitary Council had inherited four legacy IT environments, all using different technologies.
- The One programme aimed to provide all staff with the same laptop and login.
- The programme had been delayed by the pandemic which in turn had led to a shortage in transistor chips. IT had needed to provide for the new way of working brought on by the pandemic.
- Six old data systems would be decommissioned.
- A majority of the Council's IT applications had been rationalised and all applications would be rationalised by 2025.

During the Member discussion, the following points were made:

- The IT department had gained experience in moving network links from King George V House in Amersham. If the Walton Street Office were to close in the future, it would be possible to relocate IT Services.
- The most complex part of the IT One Programme was still ahead however it was not possible to provide a definitive month in 2025 when the project would be finished. Flexibility had been built into the new system and the plan which was constantly being

revised.

- One Member congratulated the IT team on the progress made so far and another Member highlighted the importance of cyber training to Councillors. The IT Service Director fully supported working with the Member Development Working Group on this issue.
- A Member asked if the IT Service had encountered any resistance to standardising IT Applications. The IT Service Director confirmed there was none and that if a service requested a new IT function, there was a vetting process to check whether the requested function was already being provided thereby saving costs.
- The Microsoft platform had been maximised and this had reduced the number of customised packages that services used. If a service requested a new IT function, there was a vetting process to check whether the requested function was already being provided thereby saving costs.

The Chairman thanked the IT Service Director for the report.

AURA

The Corporate Director for Resources made the following points about project AURA:

- AURA has focussed on the Council's use of SAP, a system which was implemented in 2005 and had undergone significant customisation.
- SAP had been used for the unitary Council's financial processes making it more complex. The system was old but stable and reliable.
- There had been a need to investigate the maintenance and possible future replacement of SAP. Also, SAP needed to be made more user-friendly and better able to produce reports.
- The AURA programme had taken into account learning from other councils. For the near future, a decision had been made to continue to use SAP to keep costs low.
- It would be possible to turn on further tools to make more use of SAP's functionality.

It was noted during the Member discussion that SAP was hosted by Microsoft Azure which was cloud based and therefore not subject to slowdown during high usage.

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Director for Resources for the paper.

7 ABSENCE IN THE WORKPLACE AND ABSENCE MANAGEMENT - UPDATE REPORT

The Chairman welcomed Sarah Keyes, Service Director for Resources to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Resources gave a short introduction to the update report on Absence in the Workplace, noting:

- The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for sickness days had reduced from 9.0 days per FTE to 8.5 days per FTE for 2023-24. Staff sickness absence had reduced whilst still slightly above the KPI.
- The highest level of sickness absence was in the Adults and Health and Communities directorates but this had reduced. Absence levels in the Deputy Chief Executive and Resources directorates were comparable to absence in the private sector.
- Buckinghamshire Council compared well to other authorities for staff sickness absence.
- In September 2023, 93% of staff had no sickness absence.

The Service Director for Resources made the following points:

- The Council had completed work on reducing sickness absence with other local authorities of comparable size and some levels of sickness absence at the Council had compared favourably with private sector benchmarks.
- There had been a positive impact from HR and Organisational Development (OD) working alongside managers to put in early interventions to lower levels of sickness absence.
- The Council had received awards for its efforts to help employees stay at work.

During the following discussion, the following points were made:

- A number of Members complimented the report and the progress made.
- Some Members stated that the Council should aspire to sickness absence levels more comparable with the private sector.
- There were no specific targets for sickness absence in each directorate however Corporate Directors reviewed absence within their directorates. Once the report was completed, work could be done to compare sickness absence with vacancy levels in each directorate.
- The Resources team was working to make the reasons for absence as clear as possible. Fewer staff were taking time off for mental health reasons and shorter times were being taken.
- There had been more illnesses such as colds and covid during the winter months but this was the only effect of seasonality on short-term absence.

8 BUDGET SCRUTINY INQUIRY GROUP SCOPING PAPER

It was explained that a core group of members from the committee would need to take part in the Budget Scrutiny sessions in January 2024.

Lunch would be provided and any dietary requirements should be given to the Scrutiny Officer.

Action: Members/Chris Ward

There was a short discussion which made the following points:

- In keeping with last year's arrangement, the Scrutiny Officer had invited Corporate Directors and the Head of Finance.
- The timetable for Cabinet papers would be tight but consistent with previous years.
- An assumption should be made that Members of the budget scrutiny committee had read the papers in advance and that Cabinet Member introductions should be as streamlined as possible to maximise questioning.
- Members agreed the budget scrutiny scoping paper.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman noted that further topics for the work programme may emerge from the budget scrutiny process.

10 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Thursday, 22nd February at 2.00pm in The Oculus