



Report to Cabinet

Date: 16 February 2021

Title: **Budget Scrutiny 2021 Report**

Relevant councillor(s): Councillor Ralph Bagge, Chairman of the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group

Author and/or contact officer: Leslie Ashton, Senior Scrutiny Officer
leslie.ashton@buckinghamshire.gov.uk; 01895 837227

Ward(s) affected: Not ward specific

Recommendations:

Recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group to Cabinet are that:

1. In future years:
 - a) A zero based budget be prepared to help drive out further savings and efficiencies
 - b) A four-year revenue budget be prepared to enable an assessment of the Council's financial sustainability
 - c) Budget Scrutiny members should receive more detailed information in good time and should be involved earlier in the budgeting process, attached to portfolio budget review groups
 - d) There should be consistency in presentation from all directorates using the same presentation template.
2. Cabinet Members should revisit their budget assumptions and outcomes for the current year prior to the final budget being presented to Full Council for approval, particularly the assumptions around income for 2021/22 as income streams such as parking, planning and leisure centres are likely to continue to be significantly reduced into the 2021/22 financial year.
3. The Capital programme should be divided into those schemes which are fully funded, with deliverable business cases and those that are more aspirational, in order to give members and residents a clearer understanding of the programme. This detail should be included in the final budget (Last year's recommendation 8).

- 4. An increased contingency be considered for Children's services, where there has been a history of overspends in recent years.**
 - 5. Additional funding should be set aside for the Local Plan reserve as £3m over the next three years is likely to be inadequate (last year's recommendation 22).**
 - 6. Key Performance Indicators around planning enforcement should be robust and regularly monitored to ensure that the strongly supported increased investment delivers an improved service and value for money.**
 - 7. The Corporate Plan for Buckinghamshire Council should include a stronger commitment to Climate Change, with the aim of the Council being net Carbon Neutral by 2035 (subject to consideration of the results of the Council's Carbon Audit), and the County generally by 2050. This commitment should be explicit and transparent and will require strong political leadership to ensure delivery, and should focus on carbon reduction rather than buying in savings in order to become carbon neutral (last year's recommendation 2).**
 - 8. A specific Portfolio and Portfolio Holder should be nominated to be responsible for driving the Climate Change & Carbon Neutral agenda forward across Buckinghamshire Council and to take a leading role in championing this across the County and beyond (last year's recommendation 4).**
 - 9. That further contingency funding be allocated to property rental income loss. This is an area where the Council does not receive any Government support and will likely be significantly impacted by the effects of further lockdowns.**
 - 10. Broadband coverage across Buckinghamshire be reviewed and plans submitted to ensure Buckinghamshire is one of the most connected counties in the country. A number of Community Boards have already set up sub-groups to investigate this and we recommend this be replicated across all Community Boards that cover rural areas. A budget should be set aside to do this.**
 - 11. Cabinet should consider increasing the levels of investment in the capital programme for both footway repairs (as suggested in last year's report Page 48) and drainage issues, as both were highlighted as areas of priority for residents.**
 - 12. Cabinet should define a delivery target for affordable homes and the Cabinet Members for planning and enforcement, property and assets and housing and homelessness should work together to deliver these affordable homes in the most cost-effective way for residents. This project should be regularly monitored and we recommend that the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee should be engaged in the development of such plans.**
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13. A Task and Finish Group should be established to review the Council's real estate portfolio with a view to identifying suitable sites/buildings that could be converted to residential dwellings for key workers and the homeless (see recommendation 8 last year).

14. In anticipation of the May 2021 local elections being postponed a contingency provision of £325k should be factored in to the budget to cover members' allowances for a six-month period. If it is known by the time of the budget being approved by Full Council that there is a longer postponement period, a provision of £745k should be made to cover a twelve-month period.

Reason for decision: For Cabinet to consider the recommendations of the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Members of the Finance and Resources Select Committee formed a Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group, chaired by Councillor Ralph Bagge to scrutinise the Draft Revenue Budget 2021/22 and Capital Programme 2021-2025 which were approved by Cabinet on 5 January 2021.
- 1.2 Over the period of 11 to 14 January 2021 the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group held meetings in public questioning each Portfolio Holder on their revenue budget and capital programme proposals with a view to making recommendations to Cabinet for it to consider at its meeting on 16 February 2021 prior to submitting the final budget to Full Council for approval on 24 February 2021.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Cabinet agreed the draft budget at its meeting on 5 January 2021 and Budget Scrutiny meetings were subsequently held on 11 to 14 January 2021, with each Portfolio Holder questioned in turn about their budget proposals.
- 2.2 The public were able to submit questions via email or social media channels.
- 2.3 The Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group recognise that this is a unique revenue budget which has been produced for one year, opposed to the usual four-year period and recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic has created a challenging and difficult time for Buckinghamshire.

- 2.4 The Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group recognise the hard work of members and officers in preparing the budget in light of the global pandemic and it also being the Council's first year of operation. Members are aware that issues outside of this Council's control could change key assumptions significantly, particularly if Covid restrictions remain for a prolonged period, or further lockdowns are enforced.
- 2.5 The Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group highlight that since Cabinet agreed the draft budget, the nation has entered a third lockdown period and this will have an even greater impact on Council finances particularly in areas such as projected income sources, commercial revenue and council tax receipts.
- 2.6 The Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group's key findings and recommendations are set out in the report attached at **Appendix 1**.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 Appendix 1 provides further context to the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group's recommendations. Cabinet are asked to consider these recommendations and will provide a response.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 These will be considered as part of the Cabinet's response.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 These will be considered as part of the Cabinet's response.

6. Consultation with local Councillors & Community Boards

- 6.1 The report and recommendations were produced by the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group which was formed of a cross-party group of Members from the Finance and Resources Select Committee. There was no requirement to consult any wider.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 The draft budget itself was subject to a period of public consultation between 1 October and 8 November 2020 and members of the public were welcomed to submit questions to the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group through the Council's social media channels and by email.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 As noted above, Cabinet will provide a response to the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group's recommendations at its meeting on 16 February 2021. The final budget will be presented to Full Council for approval on 24 February 2021.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 [Cabinet Papers](#) (containing draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme papers) – 5 January 2021

Budget Scrutiny Daily Packs – [11 January](#), [12 January](#) and [14 January 2021](#)

