



Report to Cabinet

Date: 15 February 2022

Title: **Budget Scrutiny 2022 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. The Corporate Plan be reviewed prior to the end of this financial year. The Corporate Plan is vital in providing the vision that drives the strategies, programme, and budget.
2. A timetable of key strategies which are in development across the Council, with target dates for key milestones, should be shared with all members on a quarterly basis. This would provide renewed focus on delivery of strategies and enable members to identify opportunities for consultation or pre-decision scrutiny by the relevant select committee and local members where appropriate.
3. Beyond the Better Buckinghamshire Programme, all services should constantly be reviewed and challenged for demonstration of best value. Members note that service areas such as Policy and Communications have had capacity to cope with exceptional demand over the past two years whereas other service areas have tended to hire interim staff to cope with times of higher demand. Members welcome an ongoing assessment of how each service is delivering value and question whether this level of budget would be necessary as the Council returns to a 'business as usual' footing. Publishing headcounts to understand staffing levels across all areas would support this assessment. A further review should be considered post-COVID to consider further reductions and potential outsourcing of non-core activities to save costs.
4. Greater visibility should be given to contingencies contained within the budget, as well as any in-year release of contingencies so that residents can see and understand how decisions are reached and the pressures on the budget. Consideration should be given to including an additional appendix in the final budget paperwork to be

approved by Cabinet. Graphical representation grouping portfolio areas would also be helpful for Members and residents.

5. Consideration be given to running the Social Worker Academy with a smaller cohort on an ongoing basis to mitigate issues of recruitment shortages and a reliance on high cost agency staff. Metrics to measure the success of the programme should be developed and shared and Cabinet should explore whether this is a model that can be replicated in other hard to recruit areas such as planning.
6. The Council's property rationalisation strategy should have a clear vision of future ways of working and be delivered at a greater pace, with regular updates provided to Finance and Resources Select Committee. Acknowledging that an Estates Strategy is under development, the Council can shape its own future via 'Work Smart' and targeting an earlier date for downsizing the Council estate will increase efficiency savings. Should the Council return to pre-pandemic work patterns there would still be excess office space, therefore decisions to dispose or repurpose some assets should be made in the coming financial year.
7. Additional funding should be set aside for the development of the Local Plan as £750k p.a. over the next three years is likely to be inadequate, particularly in light of possible changes arising when the Planning White Paper is taken forward.
8. Cabinet should agree a clear strategy which includes a delivery target for affordable homes. This strategy and target number should be produced in 2022/23 and cover a greater scope for targeted housing for Key Workers, Social Rent and Supported Living and demonstrate the Council's desire to move at pace in this area. The Cabinet Members responsible for Planning, Property and Assets and Housing should work together to deliver these affordable homes in the most cost-effective way for residents (similar to last year's recommendation 12).
9. Cabinet should consider increasing the levels of investment for rights of way repairs to recognise the increased usage and their importance, particularly to rural and semi-rural communities.
10. That the Cabinet Member for Transport develop a strategy in 2022 for the £800k (£200k p.a.) investment into EV charging points to assess the current and future need, the number and type of charging points that could be obtained within the budget allocated, the potential income streams and to ensure there is a consistent approach to deliver these in the most cost effective way.
11. That the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment work with officers to develop an offer to improve education for Members and residents on climate change and to provide incentives to promote individual action. Members should be involved in this piece of work, via the TECC Select Committee and/or the Member Development Working Group.
12. A review of legacy Council Special Expenses should be undertaken in the coming financial year. Whilst this might be complicated due to varying arrangements with Town and Parish Councils, and recognising one of the Special Expenses is in an unparished area, the Committee believe that the term 'Special Expenses' should only be used in the budget to denote a one-off financial commitment. This would not necessarily impact on current governance arrangements, however an

assessment is required to ensure there is consistency in terms of how services are funded across the County (e.g. community centres / open spaces).

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 2022/23 to 2025/26 and Capital Programme 2022-2026 which were approved by Cabinet on 6 January 2022.
- 1.2 Over the period of 10 to 13 January 2022 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 15 February 2022 prior to submitting the final budget to Full Council for approval on 23 February 2022.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Cabinet agreed the draft budget at its meeting on 6 January 2022 and Budget Scrutiny meetings were subsequently held on 10 to 13 January 2022, 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 the hard work of members and officers in preparing a balanced budget in light of a number of ongoing uncertainties. Members are aware that issues outside of this Council's control could change key assumptions significantly, particularly if inflation raises higher than 5%, Government funding changes, White Papers come forward significantly changing policy, Covid restrictions are re-introduced at any point, or further lockdowns are enforced. However, having recognised this, the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group now acknowledge that the Council must move forward with the 'new normal as business as usual'.
- 2.4 The Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group recommendations have been developed from studying the proposed budget and capital programme, and through questioning of each Portfolio Holder. A number of observations are also contained within the report.

- 2.5 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 6 October and 14 November 2021 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 15 February 2022. The final budget will be presented to Full Council for approval on 23 February 2022.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 Cabinet Papers (containing draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme papers) – [6 January 2022](#)
Budget Scrutiny Daily Packs – [10 January](#), [11 January](#) and [13 January 2022](#)