

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday 7 January 2021 virtually.

PRESENT

Cllr Rob Bird	Cllr Nigel Robbins
Cllr Kevin Cromwell	Cllr Brian Robinson
Cllr Iain Dobie	Cllr Ray Theodoulou
Cllr Kate Haigh	Cllr Lesley Williams
Cllr Joe Harris	
Cllr Stephen Hirst	
Cllr Shaun Parsons	

In attendance:

Cllr Steve Robinson
Cllr Ben Evans
Cllr Phil Awford
Cllr Lorraine Patrick
Cllr Jeremy Hilton
Cllr John Cordwell
Cllr Rachel Smith
Cllr Paul Hodgkinson
Cllr Bernard Fisher

Cabinet Members:

Cllr Richard Boyles, Deputy Leader of Council and Cabinet Member for Children's Safeguarding and Early Years (Item 1 & 4)
Cllr Vernon Smith, Highways and Flood (Item 2)
Cllr Kathy Williams, Adult Social Care Delivery (Item 3)
Cllr Carole Allaway Martin Adult Social Care Commissioning (Item 3)
Cllr Nigel Moor, Environment and Planning (Item 2)
Cllr Lynden Stowe, Finance and Change (Item 1 & 5)
Cllr Dave Norman, Public Protection, Parking and Libraries (Item 2 & 3)
Cllr Patrick Molyneux, Economy, Education and Skills (Item 2 & 4)
Cllr Tim Harman, Public Health and Communities (Item 3)

Officers:

Pete Bungard, Chief Executive
Steve Mawson, Executive Director of Corporate Resources
Rob Ayliffe, Monitoring Officer and Director of Policy, Performance and Governance

Colin Chick, Executive Director of Economy, Environment & Infrastructure
Sarah Scott, Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Public Health
Mark Preece, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services
Gail Hancock, Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding & Care
Wendy Williams, Assistant Director for Integrated Children and Families
Commissioning
Stephen Bace, Lead Democratic Services Adviser

1. INTRODUCTION & COUNCIL STRATEGY

- 1.1 Cllr Richard Boyles, Cllr Lynden Stowe and Pete Bungard discussed the Council Strategy with members and gave an introduction to budget scrutiny day. Throughout the day the committee would meet with the Cabinet Members and Directors under the remit of each Scrutiny Committee and discuss their areas of the budget.
- 1.2 Members were advised to consider how effectively the proposed budget responded to:
- The changing needs of Gloucestershire residents and communities
 - The priorities and ambitions set out within the Council Strategy.
 - Any legislative or other changes in national policy or guidance
- 1.3 The Committee understood that the proposed budget was £480.458million.
- The Budget issued for consultation was based on 1.99% Council Tax increase and 2.76% National Social Care Levy.
- Band D Council Tax of £1,409.22
- The Budget Consultation period ran from 18th December 2020 to 15th January 2021.
- 1.4 Members were informed that there would be an additional £1.3 million in funding which would be split between adults and children budget areas.
- 1.5 There were a number of areas highlighted for members as priorities and now included in the council strategy including:
- Helping children and young people and schools recover from the pandemic
 - Delivering the local outbreak management plan,
 - Addressing health inequalities,

- Continue to build on the Covid Health Hub,
- Leading Covid economic recovery
- Major Transport and Infrastructure schemes,
- Supporting agile working,
- Adapting buildings and estate to fit purpose.

- 1.6 There was scope for the budget to change further, and Cabinet and Senior Officers were looking forward to scrutiny's contribution. It was felt that Central Government had provided the funds to meet most of the costs associated with COVID-19.
- 1.7 For context the Council was having to handle a record number of looked after children and the consequence of Covid-19 pandemic meant that there would likely need to be changes to practices across all services. The frailty of the older population was likely to increase but the adult single programme had been a success for the Council. There were pressures on the acute hospital and 200 'discharge to assess' beds had been provided. Members understood that there were ambitious infrastructure programmes planned such as the A417 and A419 missing link.
- 1.8 Members were reminded that senior officer advice could be sought to cost up any budget proposals being put forward by opposition groups and members.
- 1.9 In response to questions it was explained that the response to climate change was an integral part of the strategy.
- 1.10 In relation to the social care levy, it was unknown how long that would continue. It would likely require national government to do a fundamental review of adult social care funding to change this. This was a one year settlement and left scope for changes in future years. Some funding had been taken from the new homes bonus but there was a net increase of £1.28 million which would be split with £500,000 for adults, £500,000 into the cost of children's social care placements and £280,000 into an inflation contingency fund relating to contract costs.
- 1.11 Members discussed the long term public health effects of long Covid, which were relatively unknown but could create additional budget pressures in the future.
- 1.12 There was discussion around the impact of inequality and the work that had been carried out by the community and voluntary sector. This was something that members wished to see reflected in funding decisions going forward. It was emphasised that much of the support through Covid-19 had been provided by communities at a very local level, and it was clear that they had the best understanding of local needs.

2. Environment Scrutiny and Economic Growth

2.1 Cllr Nigel Moor, Cllr Vernon Smith, Cllr Patrick Molyneux and Cllr Dave Norman outlined the Commissioning Intentions and budget changes relating to Economy, Environment and Infrastructure. In particular members noted the following:

- The majority of growth within the budget looked to cover contracted inflation and pay increases
- The £350,000 cost increase within the budget under in-house traffic management related to strengthening the team to be able to be more responsive to requests from members and the public.
- A one off cost increase relating to carbon reduction pathway
- The team had worked well together during the past nine months with procurement, finance, legal and communications to achieve the common goal of minimising the impact of Covid-19
- Major schemes continued to move forward despite the disruption.
- A high proportion of Council and Cabinet questions related to this area of the budget putting pressure on teams.
- The revised Local Transport Plan would be received by Council in due course
- 2020/21 climate change strategy underpinned everything within the budget
- The Council would be in a better than carbon neutral position by March 2021.
- A Bus Service Strategy was being developed to ensure home to school transport was available for those who needed it including personalised plans that allowed for social distancing
- Resources and Waste Partnership was chaired by non GCC councilors
- Support was being provided with key stakeholders to help the local economy in response to Covid-19 – including broadband rollout and reskilling and training in response to job losses. All supported by library based growth hubs and the innovation lab model.
- Working closely with GFirst and partners.
- Climate change was likely to result in increased flooding issues and extreme weather events and there was provision in the budget to meet this challenge.
- Continuing to deliver the £150 million investment in the County's roads.

2.2 One member suggested that consideration should be given to a more flexible and innovative approach to home to school transport through in house provision with specialised training for drivers in working with vulnerable children and adults. It was suggested that any such budget

proposals could be costed up with senior officers and put to the administration.

- 2.3 In response to questions it was explained that the Road Safety Cabinet Panel would be reporting and that funding for proposals from this report would likely come from in year highways spending, from Fire and Rescue Service budget and from partners.
- 2.4 There was a discussion around recent flooding with one member suggesting that there needed to be clearer signposting for members and the community to seek support. In response to queries over spending on flood alleviation, it was explained that £2.1 million was within the budget each year and that to date £72.8 million had been spent. This was supported by work carried out in relation to major schemes. Some member expressed concern about a lack of work carried out in their areas. Other members provided detail of the work carried out across the County and stated that Gloucestershire was considered to be the source of best practice. One member suggested that a scrutiny task group on flooding should be scoped up to take into consideration new areas of surface flooding and a need to re map the area prior to new developments. Members supported this suggestion.
ACTION Democratic Services
- 2.5 It was stated that there had been a drop off in parking income over the previous 12 months as more people were staying home, working from home and shopping online.
- 2.6 Members noted the £3m outlined for contract inflation, and it was explained that this covered contracts across the range of services.
- 2.7 The new five year library strategy was being developed looking at how to use them better. Thirty-one libraries were operational across the County and, while browsing had been stopped due to Covid-19, click and collect and deliveries had been put in place. One member emphasised the importance of libraries and was keen to see them utilised further. One member stated that the Innovation Lab in Coleford had been a success.
- 2.8 In response to a question it was stated that 97-98% of homes had super fast broadband access and that it was now about providing for those last few percent.
- 2.9 It was explained that the Council was in the fourth year of the £150m spend on highways with details of the capital spend on page 108 of the draft MTFS.
- 2.10 In response to a question it was explained that £1.2m had been budgeted for removal of ash trees due to the Ash die back disease.

2.11 One member provided details of the need for LED lighting in his area, it was explained that there was £400,000 in the budget for LED street lighting.

3. Adult Social Care and Communities

3.1 Cllr Kathy Williams, Cllr Carole Allaway Martin, Cllr Tim Harman and Cllr Dave Norman outlined the Commissioning Intentions and budget changes detailed in the draft MTFS relating to Adult Social Care and Communities. In particular members noted the following:

- In addition to the Public Health grant, the Government had provided additional funding to support the public health response to Covid-19.
- Mental Health services were being enhanced.
- The ambition for adult social care was to allow people to live as independently as possible with support from universal services enhanced where necessary with specialist services.
- The impact on adult social care of current NHS pressures. Attempting to manage 'business as usual' while implementing additional strategies.
- Understanding and tackling health inequalities
- Local accommodation being provided to allow individuals needing support to remain in their own communities
- A paper was going to the next Cabinet meeting on Preparing for Adulthood Strategy
- Support by district outreach teams for rough sleepers and those choosing to remain on the streets.
- Support for people who had suffered domestic violence was a key priority
- In relation to the Fire and Rescue Service the focus was on continuing the improvement journey following the HMIC inspection.

3.2 One member asked whether the County Council was confident in the stability of the care home system, given the financial pressures exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In response it was explained that significant support was given to all care homes and that the Gloucestershire Care Providers Association met with staff and senior officers to talk through any issues. In the long term, the sector would face challenges as client numbers would fall due to individuals choosing to remain in their own home. It was clarified that under the Care Act there was a responsibility to manage the care market and there was an Integrated Brokerage Team to support the market and source packages of care. The Council was still awaiting the Social Care Green paper and longer term financial settlement plans for the sector.

- 3.3 A member expressed concern about the above inflation increase in council tax and the growth in demand for social care funding. He asked whether the NHS would provide funding for the County Council in relation to their actions to help relieve pressure as instructed by central government. In response it was detailed that the Integrated Care System had provided long established relationships with the CCG and that there was £35m of 'joint money' that could be used to buy the beds being used by the Local Authority to help relieve pressure on NHS beds. It was emphasised that we were 'in this together' and there was daily contact between GCC and NHS teams in terms of moving patients safely and quickly through the system.
- 3.4 It was explained that the changes to the Money Advice Service was due to duplication with the Citizens Advice offer.
- 3.5 In response to concerns about budget decreases in wider Public Health work it was explained that these were minor decreases and overall there was much more investment in services relating to domestic abuse, rough sleepers, children's weight management, in addition to the additional grants relating to the pandemic. There was important work to be done on inequalities and long Covid going forward.
- 3.6 Some members felt that funding for community groups sometimes went to larger organisations that would be 'helicoptered' in to provide services that were already being provided by local community groups who had long established relationships. It was explained that funding for 'Know your Patch' network was about supporting those groups. The Cabinet Member supported the need for local groups to come together and for this funding to be used effectively.
- 3.7 Members welcome the upcoming strategy around preparing for adulthood which supported transitions up to the age of 25.
- 3.8 One member raised the importance of the Fire and Rescue Service budget also providing appropriate equipment and expertise for 'Rescue'. It was explained that the service was always looking at ways to respond more effectively to 999 calls and that if additional equipment was needed then options involving capital would be explored. One member suggested that SARA, who carried out a great deal of work on water rescues, receive a donation to help support them. It was explained that equipment was donated to SARA but that the Cabinet Member would take on board the suggestion.
- 3.9 In response to questions, it was explained that every Fire and Rescue Service station was a community one and was open for use. The example was given that Cheltenham East Fire Station was being used as a vaccination centre for Covid-19.
- 3.10 Members noted the commissioning intentions for the Adult Care budget and asked for additional detail on how savings would be realised and how

the budget would be used over the coming year. In response it was explained that the strategy of supporting individuals to remain in their own home benefitted the individual and helped save money. In addition the use of technology, particularly over the period of the pandemic provided additional support in this area.

- 3.11 The Health and Wellbeing Board would be working with all agencies and partners and would revisit its work plan at a future meeting to ensure that the wider implications of projects on health and planning policy were being considered.

4. Children and Young People

- 4.1 Cllr Richard Boyles and Cllr Patrick Molyneux outlined the Commissioning Intentions and budget changes detailed in the draft MTFs relating to Children and Young People. In particular members noted the following:

- Gloucestershire's Children's Services had been on an Improvement Journey following the Ofsted Inspection.
- There was a significant investment in Vulnerable Children in the budget with £3m for external placements. This would need to be monitored carefully.
- The introduction of Trevone House as a facility to provide the best support for young people and to help control this budget area
- 21.2% of the workforce was now agency workers, which was down from around 50%. This was a more manageable level.
- Continuing rise in children in care numbers (800) and those on child protection plans
- Net of Covid-19 current overspend in the service of £7.669 million, the latest report to cabinet for January would show a £1 million improvement on this.
- Small savings within education through the reduction in pension costs
- Increase in the number of foster carers
- GCC was not unlike other authorities in experiencing challenges in this area with the LGA identifying a £3bn gap in the children service budget nationally.
- A Sufficiency Strategy was in place to attempt to manage the children's social care market and ensure the right mix of placements.

- 4.2 Members expressed concern about year on year overspends in the Children's budget and suggested that if we know we are going to overspend would it not make more sense to increase the budget to begin with? In response it was explained that the budget figures provided in the draft budget for 2021/22 were felt to be at the right level and was a realistic budget for the service with the caveat that the placement budget was still likely to require further resourcing during 2021-22. Currently this included an additional £3million as well as £1million in contingency for additional placement costs but this was unlikely to be sufficient given a combination of rising unit costs, increases in the number of children in

care related to the impact of Covid -19 and the time required to deliver our sufficient strategy. Of the £11.5 million additional money relating to Covid-19 it was felt that an element of that would be needed in Children's Social Care and that stability was key.

- 4.3 In response to questions it was explained that there had been a service improvement action plan in place to recruit 40 new foster carers. The aim was to increase capacity and build on the support provided. In addition there was a new offer being developed for an Edge of Care service to help families to continue with their birth children. Supported by an external transformation consultant there would be an intensive family preservation service.
- 4.4 Trevone House had been up and running for over a month and it was clarified that there had been no delay. Two residents had moved into the house in the previous few days. Five young people were in Trevone House and this put the Council on target.
- 4.5 SEND funding was complex with a structural deficit of £8.4 million. This was a school owned deficit not a County Council one but there was no chance of schools being able to absorb it. The hope was that the current Government SEND review would provide a long term solution. There was successful funding for a SEMH school to open in 2022/23.
- 4.6 There was emphasis on the importance of early intervention with one member talking about the first 1000 days of a child's life. Early years provision had led to a significant improvement in school readiness.
- 4.7 Members noted the scrutiny task group that had made recommendations feeding into the development of the Youth Strategy. This strategy was not looking to reduce services but would be looking to provide universal and specialist services. This would be going to Cabinet in April and then out to the market. Some members commented that outreach youth work within communities was an option which should be explored as well as in-house provision. In response it was explained that the priority was looking at what was in the best interest of the children and that there was a balanced view on whether that be in house services or outsourced where the County did not have provision.
- 4.8 Members emphasised the importance of being proactive and preemptive in strategies to identify potential problems to prevent children reaching the point where they needed to be in care. There was concern about the potential spike of numbers of referrals in the future as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Officers responded by stating that the spike was expected and that this analysis had been done as part of the budget setting. It was a recognised risk on the budget.

5 Corporate Services

- 5.1 Cllr Lynden Stowe outlined the Commissioning Intentions and budget changes detailed in the draft MTFS relating to Corporate Resources. In particular members noted the following:
- There was £600,000 within the budget to enable the transition to Office 365 as well as IT infrastructure and additional software.
 - There was a specific increase in the budget for legal services for children. This was a difficult recruitment environment.
 - £455,000 was held centrally for contract contingency fund in case of contract inflation.
 - The commitment to climate change was embedded throughout with the Council becoming carbon neutral in 2021.
 - It was emphasised that there was a commitment to our staff to provide the appropriate accommodation and IT whatever the future held in store. Alongside this HR support, staff car parking and support around health and wellbeing was being provided.
 - One saving identified was in relation to contributions to the pension fund where, as a result of good returns, it was 100% funded.
- 5.2 In response to a question it was clarified that the contract contingency fund was budgeted within Corporate Resources but would be used for contracts across other services.
- 5.3 There was a discussion about the continued disposal of property assets. It was recognised that changing working practices such as social distancing and working from home would mean that the Council estate would have to be used in new ways. While there were challenges here there were also cost savings. It was explained that the quarterly list of disposals was still in operation and received by Cabinet. One member suggested that when disposing of land and assets consideration should be given to providing social housing. In response there was a discussion around affordable and social housing and the support being provided through large scale development and capital sales. The Cabinet Member detailed the importance of ensuring best value from asset sales and that receipts from capital sales were a part of the budget process. He would like to see continued work between the Council and district colleagues for good quality and design, preferably carbon neutral housing.
- 5.4 One member asked how the Council was going to fulfil the commitment made when declaring a climate emergency to reduce carbon emissions in Gloucestershire. In response it was explained that the first priority was to 'get our own house in order' and lead by example, setting the right framework for

others to follow. The aim to plant 35 million trees in Gloucestershire was also cited as an example of the actions being taken. There would also be opportunities for help provide finance and support partners in their actions to achieve this aim. The administration would welcome any more positive ideas in formulating the budget and strategy to help in this. Some members suggested that climate change should receive a higher profile in the Council Strategy.

- 5.5 One member expressed surprise that the reserves had not been increased despite the additional risks the Council had identified over the past year. In response it was explained that an actual risk assessment of reserves had been carried out to estimate the appropriate level. In the past a flat percentage of revenue had been taken to determine the level of general reserves. There was confidence that the level of general reserves was adequate after considering the areas of biggest risks and overspends and the realisation of savings.

6. Summary

- 6.1 The Committee had the opportunity to feed back to the Chief Executive and Cabinet Members on the themes and trends that had been identified over the course of the day.

- 6.2 Members had been advised to consider how effectively the proposed budget responded to:

- The changing needs of Gloucestershire residents and communities
- The priorities and ambitions set out within the Council Strategy
- Any legislative or other changes in national policy or guidance

While the Committee did not make any formal recommendations, the significant comments raised by Members against those criteria (minuted in detail previously) are listed below:

- The response to climate change to have greater prominence within the Council Strategy with more explicit detail on the direction of travel.
- Recognition of the challenges of long Covid with some members asking that the need to support people with long Covid be included within the pressures for adult social care.
- The voluntary community sector needed continued support following the additional pressures over the pandemic period. Some members' emphasised the need for a focus on funding for local groups who have knowledge of communities.

- Concerns expressed regarding the long term funding solution for adult social care and pressure on the Gloucestershire tax payers. Members recognised that the current financial settlement was for one year with potential changes in future years.
- Concern about the pressures on the children services budget. Members noted the assurances that the proposed budget was a realistic one but recognised the overspending in previous years and unknown implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- One member suggested looking at new ways of providing home to school transport that would ensure trained drivers and management of costs.
- Members suggested a scrutiny task group on flood alleviation. A one page strategy would be scoped up with interested members.
- Some members asked for additional details around cost reductions with the Adult Social Care budget.
- Members recognised the importance of providing stability and support for the care home market.
- One member asked that consideration be given to how additional support could be provided to SARA.
- Members noted the timetable for the upcoming Youth Strategy and the influence of the scrutiny task group on this.
- Recognition of the changing use of office space for County Council staff going forward, the importance of the appropriate utilisation of assets and the need for continued improvement in IT provision to allow for effective home working.