



## **BUDGET SCRUTINY**

**20<sup>th</sup> January 2025 at 6.00 p.m.**

### **Present:**

Councillors Aisthorpe, Augusta, Beasant, Bonner, Bright, Freeston, Goodwin, Humphrey, Kaczmarek, Mill, Patrick, K Swinburn, Wheatley and Wilson.

### **Officers in Attendance:**

- Sharon Wroot (Interim Chief Executive)
- Carolina Borgstrom (Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure)
- Katie Brown (Director Adults, Housing and Communities)
- Diane Lee (Director of Public Health)
- Anne Marie Matson (Director of Children's Services)
- Spencer Hunt (Assistant Director Safer and Stronger Place)
- Guy Lonsdale (Interim Section 151 Officer)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance)
- Kath Jickells (Assistant Director Environment)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director Policy, Strategy and Resources and Statutory Scrutiny Officer)
- Paul Bassett (Assistant Director Adult Social Services)
- Charlotte Dring (Assistant Director Housing and Communities)
- Sam Buckley (Strategic Lead – Finance)
- Zoe Campbell (Senior Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)

### **Also in attendance:**

- Councillor Jackson - Leader of the Council
- Councillor Shreeve – Portfolio Holder for Health Wellbeing and Adult Social Care
- Councillor S Swinburn - Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport
- Councillor Dawkins- Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and the Visitor Economy
- Councillor Shepherd - Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities
- Councillor Harness - Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets

## **SPBS.5 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR**

RESOLVED – That Councillor Mill be appointed as the Chair for this meeting.

COUNCILLOR MILL IN THE CHAIR

## **SPBS.6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received for this meeting from Councillor Brookes, Cracknell and Hudson.

## **SPBS.7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest for this meeting.

## **SPBS.8 DRAFT BUDGET AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2026/27 – 2028/29**

Members received a report from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets outlining how the Council planned to deliver its agreed financial strategy over the coming three-year period.

Councillor Jackson, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and members were invited to ask any questions on the draft budget, medium-term financial plan, draft business and commissioning plans and the capital programme.

### **Medium Term Financial Plan**

A member asked if the cleaner greener agenda was going to be included in the mid term financial plan going forward and could it be referenced in the final papers because it related to on-going service delivery and transparency.

Referring to the potential increase in council tax, a member queried if officers had looked at how other local authorities were able to provide services and not increase council tax or if so a smaller percentage than proposed. Councillor Jackson responded that nothing has been decided at this stage about the council tax and it would be considered at Council in February.

A member felt that council did not have a grip on the home to school transport service.

A member asked what three delivery risks were for transformation programme Councillor Jackson responded that it was the continued transformation in children's services and challenges within adult social care.

Following on the members queried if the transformation programme didn't deliver in year, what was plan b to keep the budget balanced. Councillor Jackson explained that there were a number of proposals set out with the budget papers and they were working on a number of the them at the same time and would put emphasise on those but if new opportunities came forward they would be considered. He highlighted that the budget setting with risks was unavoidable. The member asked if this could be included in the quarterly reports that went to scrutiny so that they could keep track.

Ms Wroot explained the approach was to identify risks throughout the year and explore alternative mitigating measures to balance the budget. She agreed that the quarterly report could be enhanced to include this information.

A member queried if the savings expected in last year's budget had been realised. Councillor Harness responded that a balance budget was achieved.

A member noted that that were was an increase in the sale of assets and what had driven that. Councillor Harness clarified that there had been more transformation requests and the sale of assets generated additional capital to support the transformation programme. Councillor Jackson explained there was no point in retaining property or land that was no longer required because others could make effective use of the asset and it turn it would help to transform other service areas or pay off debts.

A member queried if estimate figures within the report were realistic and was there a process to making them robust. Mr Lonsdale explained that the finance team worked with service areas to develop their business plans to ensure that they reflected reality and there was an expectation that the plans were delivered in year. He appreciated that whilst there were variances it was important there was a balanced budget. Mr Wroot highlighted that the quarterly finance and performance reports that went to scrutiny was an opportunity for members to challenge and ask questions. Councillor Jackson also confirmed that the Portfolio Holders had regular oversight of their areas so they would provide challenge.

A member was concerned that assets that had not been sold appeared on the same budget .Councillor Harness responded that it was how we managed the process and update on each sale.

Councillor Jackson explained that there was a list of assets for disposal and it depended on the market as to whether or not is was viable to sell

those asset at the time. Mr Lonsdale referred to the capital receipt reserve which funded the planned use of assets however highlighted that it did not rely on other sales of assets.

A member asked if there had been any discussion with central government about the special education needs budget. Councillor Harness confirmed that the council were waiting to hear and that other local authorities were in the same position. Ms Wroot explained that the final settlement was due in February 2026. In the event that did not come forward this report was the back up and the narrative would be updated for the final budget.

## **Business Delivery and Commissioning Plans**

### **Resources**

A member referred to the improved performance of local taxation and benefit team and queried what it meant. Councillor Harness explained it was the speed of which applications were processed..

A member asked how much it cost to run the Academies NEL system. Officers agreed to look into this and provide a written response.

### **Environment and Regulatory Services**

Referring to the main budget areas for environment and regulatory services a member asked for clarification what the -£418k in the other column referred too. Ms Borgstrom confirmed that is it was the cost recovery line.

### **Regeneration**

Referring to the main budget areas for economy (regeneration) a member asked for clarification what the -£834k in the other column referred too. Officers agreed to look into this and provide a written response.

A member was concerned where the money was showing in the budget for any potential work to be carried out at the central library if approved. Councillor Harness confirmed there was no commitment just removing the asbestos at present as no decision had been made for the long term plan for the library at this stage.

Another member asked where the money would come from when the decision was made about the future of the building. Mr Lonsdale explained that it would come from the capital investment programme where there was a capital flexibility line for new schemes.

A member was concerned about the amount of money being spent on the SHIP programme and queried if it had achieved a net profit. Ms Borgstrom confirmed that programme was going in line the business plan and that the council would recover the money invested. Councillor Jackson explained the council had sold Pioneer Business Park units and made a good return.

A member queried the amount of money allocated to the Freshney place budget for RAAC which was over half the budget. Councillor Jackson confirmed that the mitigation was in the plan. A member felt that the line had moved out and that it looked like it was an additional cost that wasn't included in the schedule last year and queried if it was new capital expenditure. Ms Wroot confirmed it was capital investment for RAAC, which was approved in last year's budget and was included in the overarching business plan and business case for the purchase for Freshney Place. Mr Lonsdale highlighted the full business case incorporated the overall financial assessment and had no impact on the council tax payer.

A member was concerned that it was difficult to keep a track on the income used to service borrowing on future and past schemes and asked if it would be possible make it clear where the borrowing had gone and how much revenue we received. Mr Lonsdale explained that a lot of the financial information was provided with assumed income levels and this detail was provided to relevant scrutiny panels at regular meetings so they got a clear understanding of what had been invested, the costs and overall subsidies of the scheme. The member asked for a breakdown of the figures before the budget for Freshney Place to include cost of capital and income.

### Infrastructure

A member queried if there was a line in the budget for electric car charging. Councillor Swinburn confirmed that there was no line at present because officers were still working to capitalise on the funding and were at discussion stages with suppliers which included the pavement chargers.

A member highlighted the backlog maintenance and queried what was being done to tackle it and why was it budgeted for the next few years. Mr Lonsdale confirmed that there was more narrative once the back log was cleared and there would be a budget line for ongoing maintenance.

A member asked why there were no disabled facilities grant allocation for the future. Councillor Swinburn confirmed that the council were still awaiting for confirmation of funding.

Referring to Corporation Road Bridge, if the council borrowed more money, it was not identified in the report and therefore how would members be assured it would be incorporated. Mr Lonsdale confirmed that

it would be included in the budget on the capital flexibility line and associated costs in the revenue budget. Officers would include the narrative in the final budget.

### Safer and Stronger Place

A member felt there was not enough narrative around in the Safer and Stronger Place section for the work that was being undertaken to reduce violence around women and girls. Councillor Shepherd explained that due to the nature of this work there was a lot of work going with partners privately due to confidentiality. Mr Hunt highlighted that there was a clear programme of work and the white ribbon campaign across the council was a success and the recent coms in scrutiny could be reflected in the business plan.

Referring to the safer communities employee costs budget. A member asked for clarification to understand what roles were included as they were worried that it was a niche area where there were vacancies. Councillor Shepherd explained that there had been an increase in staff when EQUANS civil enforcement, CCTV control room and street based enforcement employees tupe'd over to the council. Mr Hunt explained that with the increase in resources was part of the budget setting process.

### Children And Family Services

There were no questions.

### Adult Services

Members were interested in the pilot of the an AI tool in adult services to minimise costs whilst maximising efficiency. Ms Brown explained that AI had come a long way and the next steps were to look at the outcomes and decide if it was feasible to use the AI tool going forward.

### Housing

A member noted that there was no allocated funding for the rough sleeper grant accommodation for the next three years in the budget especially as the government had just launched the new strategy. The member queried if there were anything in the final plan. Mr Lonsdale confirmed that the grant allocation had not been confirmed at this stage.

A member asked how much of the housing budget was allocated to rectify the situation with the number empty homes across borough. Ms Borgstrom explained that staff were transferred from EQUANS to look at this as part of the transformation plan. Ms Brown confirmed that there was a significant amount of work and engagement required to reduce the number of empty homes by bringing them back into use and she highlighted that there was no easy solution.

### Public Health

Members queried if officer time to implement Marmot was in the budget. Councillor Shreeve confirmed there was £15k fully funded from the transformation budget.

Referring to Swan House a member asked if there were any plans to use capital money to build another facility like it. Ms Brown confirmed that the strategy and long term approach to supporting homeless people was being developed. The member asked if there was any money in reserves to build these types of facilities. Mr Lonsdale confirmed there was no specific fund. All business cases were predicated on saving and corporate borrowing to pay for itself. He explained that there was nothing to stop adding to the capital programme if there were benefits to the Council and savings could be generated.

### Capital Programme

There were no questions raised by members.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted, and the minutes of this meeting be included as part of the response to the consultation on the proposals.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 7.44 p.m.