

Our Council Plan and Revenue Budget 2023/24

Summary of comments from Member Development Session held on 20 January 2023

An all-member budget event was held on 20 January 2023 to outline the Council Plan and Draft Budget for 2023-24 ahead of scrutiny by the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee (PFSC) on 25 January, agreement by Cabinet on 31 January and approval at County Council on 17 February. The event included a plenary session setting out the over-arching budget followed by individual breakout groups by scrutiny committee portfolio area. There was no breakout group for PFSC responsibilities as formal scrutiny by the committee took place on 25 January. The comments and questions from the plenary session and each of the breakout groups are set out below for information and consideration by the Cabinet.

1. Plenary Session

- Has the impact of the above average population increases for West Sussex been considered when planning future provision of services and are these increases met by a growth in Council Tax base projections. Have modelling exercises been completed in relation to single occupancy and discounted rates in relation to Council Tax collections. Can census data be used to plan and manage future service provision.

Response

In estimating the budget pressures for 2023/24, services have considered a number of different cost drivers relevant to each service and modelled the potential impact to provide a best estimate of the likely pressures. In many cases this will include looking at population numbers and the latest available information. High level data from the 2021 census has been published and has shown almost a 10% increase in the population, particularly in the over 65s and this varies across the county. For future years, more granular detail will have been published and will be a key factor in financial modelling of future pressures and the demand for services across different parts of the county.

In relation to the Council Tax base, it is unclear if the census has been taken into account for the estimates provided by the district and borough councils for 2023/24 but is likely to be a factor in future year's estimates. The current estimates provided by the district and borough councils will take into account their latest information in relation to single occupancy and other Council Tax discounts.

- Is there confidence that the savings identified will be deliverable.

Response

Yes, all savings for 2023/24 have been reviewed and are considered deliverable.

- Is the contingency budget sufficient to meet the needs of growing road maintenance requirements.

Response

The contingency budget is a provision we make as part of the revenue budget to meet spending pressures which might arise over the year in one or more of our portfolio areas. Therefore, at this moment in time, we do not commit the contingency to any one area. With regard to highway maintenance, for 2023/24 we have increased the highways budget by a net £6m. We are also proposing to commit a further £4.5m in year to help address highway maintenance, including flooding issues. In addition, as part of the 2022/23 budget, we agreed to invest an extra £21m capital to help meet the needs of growing highway maintenance requirements.

- Concerns were raised regarding the Special Education Needs and Home to School Transport budgets as these are challenging areas of increasing demand and complexity.

Response

This concern is noted. An additional £1.4m has been put into the budget for 2023/24 but this will remain under review and will be closely monitored in year.

- The expected review of Social Care Funding is a continuing concern in relation to the impact this will have on service provision and the Council budget.

Response

The delay in the social care reforms was welcomed but still remains a significant financial risk in the run up to October 2025. This will be closely monitored and scenario planning will be undertaken to fully understand future potential pressures.

- Concerns raised regarding the staff vacancy rates across the Council and the impact this may have on service provision.

Response

Recruitment and retention remains a key challenge for the County Council and the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee received an update at their meeting on 25 January 2023. Vacancy levels vary across services and will continue to be monitored through 2023/24. A further update will be presented to Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee in 12 months.

2. Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

- Regarding the £4.5m earmarked for roads/highways/flooding, what governance process was foreseen, and opportunities for scrutiny in particular?

Response

All proposals will be underpinned by a business case before works proceed. An update will be presented to Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee in March.

- Could we try to strengthen work to enforce riparian responsibilities in order to prevent flooding?

Response

This is noted and will be considered during 2023/24.

- Do we take account of the economic impact when roads have to be closed due to flooding? Safety is the prime concern when closing roads.

Response

When closing roads, a number of different factors are taken into consideration. The economic impact is considered but safety remains the key concern.

- Regarding savings proposals for 2023/24, are there any for which the Cabinet Members have deliverability concerns? Most of the savings contain a level of risk – street lighting LED is probably the biggest challenge as the Council is not in control of the Private Finance Initiative approval process.

Response

All of the savings have been reviewed and are expected to be delivered as planned.

- Are there any project risks related to delivery of our solar and battery schemes? Connection to the national grid is the biggest challenge.

Response

A full update on the projects can be considered at a future Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

- Is the high vacancy rate affecting service delivery? It is the staff vacancies that are proving very difficult, and in some cases impossible, to fill that are affecting some aspects of service delivery.

Response

The vacancy factor of 6% is reflecting current levels but will be kept under review and reported through the quarterly Performance and Resources Report (PRR).

- Welcomed the introduction of the lane rental scheme as a potentially better way to manage street works although some concerns raised that not all roads will be covered.

Response

This has been noted.

- Could we apply for additional highways enforcement powers?

Response

There are opportunities to apply for new powers such as moving traffic offences. This response was provided at the meeting.

- The refugee resettlement scheme was discussed in terms of the longer-term plans and demands.

Response

This has been noted

- Discussed the timelines for the de-carbonisation plans for Council buildings, installation of solar panels and the electrification of the county's

fleet vehicles.

Response

This has been noted

3. Children and Young People Service's Scrutiny Committee

a) Children and Young People

- Highlighted the importance of non-statutory functions to help reduce numbers in Children's Social Care and therefore important to ensure it is adequately funded.

Response

This has been noted

- Recognise risk on the budget of the expected legislative changes as a result of the John McCallister review on Children's Social Care. The details of any changes would need to be known before any contingency or budget amounts could be set.

Response

This has been noted

- Transformation Budget – highlighted that the service was still on an improvement journey and therefore it was important not to withdraw the funding too soon. Members were assured that the requirements for this funding would be assessed for future years budgets once needs and requirements were identified, and that resilience is built into the current year as required.

Response

This has been noted

- Placement recovery plan – recognised that this was a two-year plan which expected to reduce external placements by 2.5% per year. Efforts were diluted due to complex cases; however, it was expected to meet the target, but was too early to see any outcomes yet (implemented in November 2022). Members recognised the high cost of complex cases and impact this can have on the budget, and therefore welcomed the contingency in place for this.

Response

This has been noted

b) Learning and Skills

- Highlighted importance of support and focus on early years, and impact this has on other areas of the budget. It was recognised that work was ongoing to review early years to look at where the County Council could intervene, but that there was an issue of underfunding from government which affected viability of some early years settings and it was important to lobby government on this issue.

Response

This has been noted

- Recognised the huge pressure on capital budgets to support both Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and mainstream schools, as well as the challenge around the pace of delivery of capital projects.

Response

This has been noted

- Recognised that the reasons for the increase in number of EHCNAs (education, health and care needs assessments) was complex (7-9% per year), and the issuing of plans has a direct impact on the High Needs Block, but that it was critical to understand the reasons for the increase and projected longer-term forecasts so that we can understand if the strategies in place to address this are effective.

Response

This has been noted

- Recognised that the rise in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and the pressures on Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding were national issues that West Sussex could not solve on its own. The county was focusing on a number of initiatives, including focusing on preventative work, however government needed to be part of the solution (and was important to lobby on this issue).

Response

This has been noted

- Welcomed the extra funding to support young carers, however it was recognised that this was an area of growing demand and therefore questioned whether the budget would be sufficient.

Response

This has been noted

4. Fire and Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee

- Generally satisfied with the budget presented for the Fire and Rescue Service. Comments and questions raised were:
 - Resilience and Emergencies Team (RET) structure review is about providing the service in an efficient and effective way not about stopping doing anything.
 - Recognised that it would be difficult to make any further savings whilst maintaining the same standard of service. Any review would need to consider implications for the CRMP (Community Risk Management Plan). Would also need to consider the risks and implications of a growing population in West Sussex and any legislative changes.
 - Key risk around the numbers of retained firefighters as these are dipping at the moment. Will be reviewing in terms of maintaining service response times.
 - Recognised the challenges faced by inflationary pressures, particularly in relation to pay increases.

- Will be investigating opportunities for generating additional income.
- Review of building stock is underway to ensure buildings are being utilised effectively.

Response

This has been noted

5. Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee (HASC)

- Welcomed the information and context-setting provided, which helped members' understanding of the specific challenges and budget pressures facing Adult Social Care and Health, and the Council's plans in place to address these.
- Were reassured that the proposed increase of £26.8m in the Adult Services budget for 2023/24 would address the service-related risks outlined, and that the contingency provided enough of a buffer to deal with additional costs that may arise.
- Sought reassurance that undelivered savings will be met and welcomed the fact that a proper programme of work is in place to deliver these.
- Acknowledged the service-related risks set out in the budget papers (including the challenging care market in West Sussex) and that the Adult Social Care Strategy sets out plans to address many of these.
- Recognised that the delays to social care reform create a significant degree of uncertainty.
- Recognised the significant demographic pressures impacting on Adult Social Care and supported preventative approaches to support people to live well and independently for longer, and to enable them to make good choices in terms of the support they need.
- Highlighted the need to help people be better prepared for old age and to avoid social isolation.
- Were concerned to ensure that the Council has capacity to provide the right advice and information to residents relating to Adult Social Care, including those who may be self-funding.
- Highlighted the importance of good, honest and regular communication with service users/their families; to ensure people understand what is happening and have realistic expectations about the support that they may be provided, as well as any financial implications. This should help to build trust and confidence in the service.
- Welcomed the development of an Adult Social Care Improvement Plan, and particularly initiatives to modernise working practices and develop a workforce strategy. It was suggested that the implementation of Smartcore and a new Council Digital Strategy should help support this.
- Supported the overarching ambition for the health and social care system to work better together and to shift the focus from acute support to prevention and early intervention. Critical to this will be the involvement of the Voluntary and Community Sector and Primary Care. It was recognised that the Integrated Care System and Integrated Care Board have key roles to play in achieving this ambition.
- Highlighted the importance of working with the NHS to ensure appropriate mental health services are in place. A key issue for the future will be the support for young people with complex needs (including mental health) as

they transition into adulthood. Although HASC is considering the establishment of a task and finish group on mental health services for children and young people, members discussed the potential for an evidence-gathering session or member briefing to precede this to help improve understanding and awareness and ensure focused scrutiny.

- Pointed out the key role played by carers, and supported initiatives by Carers Support West Sussex to raise their profile and to help people identify themselves as carers, to ensure they get the support they are entitled to.

Response

This has been noted.