

Feedback from Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee (24 January 2024)

The Committee thanked officers for the work undertaken in producing the detailed report. Special thanks was given to officers for the Treasury Management Strategy.

The Committee sought clarity on how the Equality Impact Assessments will be completed as part of the budget process and the commitment agreed by the Council to consider care leavers when completing these. Recognised that work is still to be undertaken in completing these assessments.

The Committee understood and supported the s151 officer's opinion around risks and issues as set out in the budget pack on pages 68-69.

Council Plan

Questioned the change in wording for the cross-cutting priority theme of tackling climate change to a commitment to protect our environment. The committee heard that the priority had been reviewed in order to widen its focus, concentrate on the county of West Sussex and to give residents a greater understanding of what the priority encompasses. Projects included within the Capital Programme support this remaining an important priority for the Council. Two members of the Committee did not support the change of wording for the priority.

With regard to the budget consultation exercise the Committee noted that the majority of respondents agreed with the priorities set in the Council Plan but did not agree with how the budget was allocated across services. Clarity was sought on whether a distinction was made between statutory and discretionary services and whether this could be made clearer in future consultations so respondents have a fuller understanding of the services provided.

Noted the importance of any change to Gatwick airport on the economy and whether greater emphasis was need on this in the Council Plan.

Draft Budget 2024/25

Queried the Council Tax growth rate assumptions and recognised the need for these to be re-visited and reviewed at the appropriate time when further information is received from the district and borough councils.

Recognised the risks and pressures being experienced across the whole Council, but particularly in Adults and Children's Services, and the work being done to manage both these pressures and the continually increasing demand for services. Supported the continued monitoring of these issues and risks by each of the scrutiny committees through the quarterly Performance and Resources Report (PRR) during 2024/25.

Recognised the risks to the budget assumptions included in the report if any Adult Social Care reforms are announced.

Queried the increase in cycle training course fees in respect of how this aligns with the promotion of the Council's Active Travel schemes but understood the need for cost recovery.

Noted the increase in savings for 'support services' in both the Finance and Property and Support Services and Economic Development portfolio areas since the committee reviewed the budget proposals in November 2023.

Welcomed the up-date in relation to the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding and requested more information on this in due course.

Welcomed the explanation of the Public Health Grant and how this is spent to support a range of Council services.

Queried the impact of the proposal to close the Record Office on a Saturday and welcomed the consultation exercise and on-line improvements being undertaken to mitigate against these.

Sought assurance that the savings in the Fire and Rescue Service would not have an adverse impact on service performance.

Heard how extra resources would be used to protect the environment.

Heard how the extra highway maintenance funding would be spent across the whole network to maintain the highway network in a more appropriate and efficient way.

Expressed great concern over the level of the Dedicated School Grant (DSG) deficit and the impact this has on the investment income for the Council. Recognised this as a big risk for the Council and await government guidance on how this will be dealt with.

Reserves

Sought clarity on the Interest Smoothing Reserve and whether this is sufficient to cover any impact of interest rate changes and any loss of investment income.

Heard how reserves would be replenished in future years and welcomed this prudent approach to maintain financial resilience and sustainability.

Sought reassurance over the use of reserves for one-off funding and to balance the budget and the risk involved with this approach going forwards. Welcomed the prudent approach and assumptions currently being made.

Capital Programme

Recognised that the Capital Programme figures are a 'snap-shot' in time and would be reviewed each year with the expenditure figures for schemes included for future years being strengthened and clarified as certainty over scheme requirements are developed.