

Cabinet

MINUTES EXTRACT OF THE CABINET MEETING HELD ON 6 FEBRUARY 2024 AT KENNET ROOM - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Richard Clewer (Chairman), Cllr Laura Mayes (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Phil Alford, Cllr Ian Blair-Pilling, Cllr Nick Botterill, Cllr Jane Davies and Cllr Nick Holder

Also Present:

Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Tony Jackson, Cllr Gordon King, Cllr Jerry Kunkler, Cllr Dr Brian Mathew, Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Pip Ridout, Cllr Martin Smith and Cllr Graham Wright

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Cllr Nick Botterill, Cabinet Member for Finance, Development Management, and Strategic Planning, presented a report which provided details of the proposed 2024/25 budget and the medium-term financial strategy 2024/25 to 2026/27.

Details were provided around the impact of continued high inflation, the addition of £36m to service budgets with a net rise of £17m to the budget. Cllr Botterill noted the difficult financial situation of many councils, and that the proposed budget was balanced without seeking closure of household recycling centres, libraries or leisure centres, and did not rely on major new identified or unspecified savings or use of reserves. However, the ongoing pressure of increases in demand and cost pressures did require the council tax rise proposed, with over 80% of the council's net expenditure funded from sources the council controlled.

On 5 February 2024 the government had provided details of an updated local government financial settlement. The council would receive an additional £4.526m, of which £3.798 was part of a social care grant and would be utilised on furthering the council's preventative approach to improve services and reduce costs. It was emphasised the additional funding could not be guaranteed for future years.

The remaining additional funding it was proposed to allocate to rural air quality monitoring projects, on refurbishment of rural play areas, and on a project to secure additional volunteers.

The Leader welcomed the additional funding announced by government, following an effective campaign from the County Council's Network. He explained the limitations on the allocation, in particular on the one-off nature, and the need to focus it in areas which did not have ongoing revenue costs. He explained many play areas were not fit for purpose, and the council would work with parish councils to discuss taking on maintenance where new equipment was able to be provided.

Cllr Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Leisure, Libraries, FM, and Operational Assets, noted the continued investment in services planned within the budget despite the difficult financial, supporting communities and the economy.

Cllr Jane Davies, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, SEND, and Inclusion, provided details of the varied support and signposting work undertaken through council libraries.

Cllr Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change drew attention to investment in a programme for provision of new real time monitoring equipment to improve data collection regarding emissions in Westbury. He stated with the newly announced funding the council intended to work with universities to develop understanding of particulate emissions across the county, and provide a meaningful baseline of data.

Cllr Graham Wright, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, explained that the Committee had held a lengthy meeting on 25 January 2024 to review the proposed budget. A report of that meeting and topics raised or discussed was included at Appendix 2.

Cllr Gordon King welcomed details of emissions monitoring for Westbury, and would save further comments for debate on 20 February 2024.

Two questions from Cllr Richard Budden as detailed in Agenda Supplement 2 were received. Cllr Budden asked a supplementary question, detailing his concerns regarding maintenance of non-principal roads, requesting area by area spending within the last 4-5 years, and that benchmarking exercises comparing the council's maintenance spending with other authorities be considered by the Environment Select Committee.

Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding, responded that much of the requested data was in the public domain or already reported to the Environment Select Committee annually, where further questions could be raised on specific details. She stated a larger proportion of expenditure for surfacing works was on non-principle roads, and provided details of information from the Department for Transport. Cllr Jerry Kunkler, Chairman of the Environment Select Committee, said he would engage further over what information would be provided for the next report to the Committee.

The Leader added that the council's approach to road surfacing was not about balancing the books as it was capital spend not revenue, and that decisions on which areas received works were based on evidence and reporting, encouraging everyone to use the available reporting systems to raise concerns. He felt the question which had been submitted underplayed the severe consequences of poor financial management and not controlling costs appropriately.

Cllr Budden stated that rural communities felt neglected and that few things affected people more than road maintenance.

The Leader stated that the council would continue to maintain and fix roads, but that this could not take away focus from the many critical services the council undertook for vulnerable adults and children, where serious harm to lives could arise.

Cllr Dr Brian Matthew welcomed the proposals regarding air quality monitoring and asked about monitoring some areas as control areas to provide comparisons.

Cllr Martin Smith noted comments in the report on difficulty recruiting and retaining planning staff and sought details of the referenced planning transformation project. Cllr Botterill stated that performance metrics had improved in planning though there was a national issue for recruiting planning officers. The transformation programme might include restructuring the planning committee set up, as well as increasing enforcement, and developing specialist teams.

Cllr Smith also sought information on a capital bid to increase the grant from the Department for Education for school maintenance. Details were provided on challenges to find contractors and arrange works.

At the conclusion of discussion, and subject to an addendum report which would be prepared relating to the additional funding announced on 5 February 2024, it was then,

Resolved:

That Cabinet recommends to Council:

- a) That a net general fund budget of 2024/25 of £485.772m is approved;**
- b) That the Council Tax requirement for the council be set at £351.077m for 2024/25 with a Band D charge of £1,805.73, an increase of £1.65 per week;**
- c) That the Wiltshire Council element of the Council Tax be increased in 2024/25 by the following:**
 - i. A 2.99% general increase;**
 - ii. Plus a levy of 2% to be spent solely on Adult Social Care;**
- d) That the Extended Leadership Team be required to meet the revenue budget targets for each service area as set out in Appendix 1 to this report, for the delivery of council services in 2024/25;**

- e) That the Extended Leadership Team be required to deliver the revenue savings plans for each service area as set out in Appendix 1 to this report, over the MTFS period 2024/25 to 2026/27;
- f) That the changes in the fees and charges as set out in Appendix 4 are approved;
- g) That the Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2030/31 is approved;
- h) That the Capital Strategy set out in Appendix 2 is approved;
- i) That the DSG budget as approved by Schools Forum is ratified;
- j) That the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, the forecast balanced budget over the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years and the MTFS 2024/25 to 2026/27 is endorsed.

Reason

To enable the Cabinet to recommend to Council a balanced revenue budget for the financial year 2024/25 and to set the level of Council Tax.

To enable effective, transparent decision making and ensure sound financial management as part of the council's overall control environment.

The Cabinet also sets out the final assumptions being used in the budget for growth, inflation, demand for services, the estimated level of income from sales, fees and charges and the level of income estimated from core funding e.g. Council Tax, Business Rates and government grants as well as the level of reserves held and assessed by the council's Section 151 Officer, as required, to provide future financial resilience.

This provides the council with a MTFS to deliver on the Business Plan priorities and drives long term financial sustainability.