

**Special Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee
Report on opposition groups' Proposed Amendments for the 2015-16 Budget**

Purpose of report

1. To report to Full Council a summary of the main issues discussed at the special meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee held on 13 February 2015. This was convened to consider opposition groups' proposed amendments to the budget recommended by Cabinet on 10 February 2015.

Background

2. This special meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee provided an opportunity for non-executive councillors to question the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, as the only group to submit proposals to the Committee, on his group's proposed amendments to the budget recommended by Cabinet on 10 February before the budget is considered by Full Council on 24 February 2015.
3. The Leader of the largest opposition group (Liberal Democrat) gave a presentation covering its proposed amendments to the Executive's budget. He made the following comments:
 - The proposals had been accepted as legal and financially deliverable by the council's Section 151 Officer, Head of Paid Service and the Monitoring Officer.
 - The proposals were made in a very challenging financial climate and the Executive's budget could not be significantly improved upon without raising the current levels of Council Tax. Therefore this year the opposition group proposed that the council raise the levels of Council Tax by 1.9%. This would mean the council would not receive the 1% freeze grant made available from central government to local authorities who do not raise Council Tax, which the Government has said will be added to local authorities' base grants in subsequent years. The total overall increase in the council's budget, as compared with the budget proposed by the Executive, was £1.719M.
 - The proposed Council Tax rise was in line with the Council Tax precept proposals of the Police and Crime Commissioner, which had been approved by the Police and Crime Panel, and the anticipated Council Tax precept from the Fire Authority.
 - Around 50% of Tier 1 local authorities nationally were considering raising Council Tax.
 - The Liberal Democrat group's budget amendments would raise an additional £1.719M and would require:

- A raise of £15.48pa for those in the lowest Council Tax band,
- A raise of £36.45pa for those in highest Council Tax band
- A raise of £23.23pa for those in Council Tax band D, used for calculation of average tax rates.

Main issues raised during questioning and debate

4. The Chairman invited the Leader of the Council and other Executive Members to respond to the amendments to lead off discussion, before opening up to general queries from the Committee and other Members in attendance.
5. It was noted that as all the amendments were financed through an increase in Council Tax funding, rather than from additional savings elsewhere in the budget, Full Council would need to consider them en bloc.
6. The Committee also welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the opposition group's amendments and provide a constructive debate.

Leader's response and Council Tax Increase

7. The Leader of the Council stated that with all proposed reductions in savings and additional investments in the amendment being financed through an increase in Council Tax, the choice to be placed before Full Council was therefore a clear policy decision of a focus on retaining the current tax rate, requiring some additional savings, or increasing it for all, in exchange for some reductions in savings in a few specific areas. The Leader stated unitary authorities were more commonly freezing their Council Tax than other authorities and that she could not support refusing the Council Tax Freeze Grant while it was available, and that the council was working with groups and services to address concerns regarding reductions or reviews proposed in the administration budget.
8. The Committee then discussed the Liberal Democrat group's proposal to increase Council Tax, with questions around whether the option had been considered by the Financial Planning Task Group. The chair of the Financial Planning Task Group stated that they had not. It was noted that the Business Plan 2013-17 planned for no Council Tax increase until 2016/17, and that there was uncertainty around the future position of the Council Tax Freeze Grant until after the May 2015 General Election.

Consideration of amendments

Garden waste collections

9. The Executive's proposal was to charge residents £40 per annum to provide a continuation of the service.
10. The Liberal Democrat group's proposal was to reverse the proposed introduction of charging for green bin collection, and instead implement a ceasing of collections between December and February. This had been the most popular option amongst

people who had responded to a recent consultation on green waste collection. It was stated this would also mitigate the risk of more people burning waste in their gardens and increased fly tipping. The amendment would require an additional investment of £0.550M against the current administration's proposals.

11. The Committee discussed the amendment, including the predicted impact of charging for green waste collection against the impact on highways and environment of the existing service, and whether there should be greater encouragement for people to compost garden waste where possible.
12. Other debate involved the potential impact on people without cars, who may not be able to transport their green waste to a recycling centre.

Wiltshire Music Service

13. The Executive's proposal was to review the provision and strategic support to music services for a proposed £0.148M saving.
14. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was to retain the Wiltshire Music Service, requiring an additional investment of £0.148M against the Executive's proposals in order to safeguard what was stated to be a vital and much valued service.
15. The Committee discussed the proposals, and a member noted that a survey for the Schools and the Local Authority Task Group showed that whilst it was a well used service, it had been rated as one of the least popular of the 25 services provided.
16. The Corporate Director with responsibility for the area stated that music tuition staff were not paid from the council's base budget, but instead their services were brokered, and it was suggested money would go directly to those providing that service, rather than through the council and incurring administration and staffing costs.
17. The responsible Corporate Director also stated that the consultation period with staff had commenced and that the council would continue to support and host the music hub, which enables the council to access almost £0.5M of external funding.

Wiltshire Hopper Service

18. The Executive's proposal was to remove the subsidy from the Royal United Hospital (RUH) and Great Western Hospital (GWH) Hopper Bus service, and to discuss alternate provision with the hospitals and the Clinical Commissioning Group for patient transport.
19. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was to review the current service and look for an alternative model of delivery while retaining the current level of provision, requiring an addition investment of £0.130M. A full year's costing of the service was included in the proposed amendments with an intention that a realistic replacement be in place by January 2016. The Leader of the opposition group expressed regret at the lack of information available about this budget proposal in advance of it being made.

20. Some members expressed concern that alternatives to the Hopper Service had not been fully explored before its removal was proposed, causing anxiety to some service users. The Leader responded that the council would work with the RUH to explore other service options that might mitigate some of the effects of stopping the service.
21. The Cabinet Member for Transport reported that currently many hospital staff use the Hopper Service to get to work. There are alternative services providing transport to hospitals in place. The Portfolio Holder for Public Transport has been working closely with relevant providers to explore alternative service models. It was discussed whether Overview and Scrutiny could add value contributing to this process.

Concessionary fares

22. The Executive's proposal was to withdraw companion passes for new applicants and taxi vouchers for wheelchair users, working with users during the overall review of transport to look at alternatives.
23. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was withdrawal of this at an additional cost of £0.070M.
24. The Liberal Democrat group leader reported that Wiltshire is a large rural county with some areas poorly served by public transport. Some people find using a bus impossible due to their disabilities or the complexity of negotiating the bus service.

Arts Grants

25. The Executive's proposal was to reduce the Arts Grant in line with the cuts the council has faced.
26. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was a reversal of the proposal to reduce Arts Grant funding of £0.089M and maintain the current spend. The opposition group Leader reported that Wiltshire's vibrant cultural scene creates sustainable communities and attracts investment from outside of the county. It was also suggested that the council, through groups such as the Legacy Board, should work more closely with community arts and cultural groups to deliver long-term sustainable solutions.
27. The Leader of the Council reported that the Cabinet Member for Arts had been working closely with arts groups regarding the proposed budget changes.

Museum Concessions

28. The Executive's proposal was to cease to provide the subsidy to provide free access to the museum conservation service.
29. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was that work be undertaken to identify opportunities for charging corporate users of the service, with the existing free service to community groups being maintained in order to protect Wiltshire's large number of local museums. In response to queries it was stated the level of savings that could be found by making just this change, rather than the full cuts

recommended by the Executive, had not been ascertained and so for this year the proposal was to reverse the £0.070M saving proposed by the Executive in its entirety.

Highways and Streetscene

30. The Executive's proposal was to make various minor changes in the provision of highways and streetscene services, to achieve savings of £0.300M
31. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was to reverse £0.249M of the proposed reductions to further develop the service, while retaining attempts to rationalise and improve efficiency in the service, such as improving partnership working between county and town / parish councils as proposed by Cabinet, and build on community participation and engagement.
32. The Committee discussed where and how savings could be achieved with the proposals, and noted that the Liberal Democrat amendment did not specify which parts of the service would receive additional investment from any savings made and the increase in proposed funding.

Community Transport Champion

33. The opposition group stated the need to make more use of community transport schemes, and proposed to create a community transport champion initially for a 12 month fixed term contract to work in partnership with Community First to assist communities in making use of the schemes, at a cost of £0.050M for salary and on-costs.
34. The Committee sought details of the proposed role, with questions on scope, cost and the extent of additional benefit provided by the role. The Cabinet Member commented that the Cabinet Portfolio Holder – Horace Prickett - already in his view carried out such a role at far less cost.

Area Board Funding

35. The Executive's proposal was to maintain the existing budget for Area Board funding, which is capital.
36. The Liberal Democrat group's amendment was to replace £0.363M of the Area Board capital funding with revenue funding, thus increasing the range of projects the boards are able to support.
37. The Liberal Democrat group leader reported that Area Boards are a success story for this council and welcomed the increasing delegation of decision making to local level. However, the group felt the challenges of having only capital funding imposed severe restrictions on how the boards are able to support the work of local community groups.

38. The Committee discussed the amendment. The Leader of the opposition group clarified that within these proposals, the overall level of funding available to Area Boards would remain the same, but that the additional cost to the council enabled greater flexibility in what could be funded, around 40% for revenue funding. The current budget is capital only as identified in para 35 above.

Conclusion

39. That Council take into account the comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in considering the proposed amendments to the financial plan 2015/16.

Councillor Simon Killane
Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

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