

# Minutes

## Performance Management Scrutiny Committee (Budget) 5<sup>th</sup> January 2022



### Present

Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
J Coleridge	Yes	S Rehman	No
G Courtauld	Yes	B Rose	Yes
Mrs C Dervish	Yes	P Schwier (Vice-Chairman)	Yes
T Everard	Yes	N Unsworth	Apologies
M Radley (Chairman)	Yes		

The following Councillors were also in attendance at the meeting: J Abbott, J Baugh, Mrs J Beavis, K Bowers, G Butland, Mrs M Cunningham, T Cunningham, P Euesden, Mrs D Garrod, A Hensman, S Hicks, P Horner, Mrs A Kilmartin, W Korsinah, D Mann, J McKee, Mrs J Pell, I Pritchard, F Ricci, Mrs W Scattergood, Mrs W Schmitt, Mrs G Spray, P Tattersley, R van Dulken, T Walsh, Mrs L Walters, D White, J Wrench and B Wright.

### 24 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

**INFORMATION:** There were no interests declared.

### 25 **MINUTES**

**DECISION:** The Minutes of the meeting of the Performance Management Scrutiny Committee held on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021 were approved as a correct record.

### 26 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

**INFORMATION:** There were no questions asked, or statements made.

### 27 **BUDGET 2022-23 AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2022-23 TO 2025-26**

**INFORMATION:** Prior to the commencement of the Item, the Chairman advised Members that the report had been prepared for the publication of the next Cabinet Agenda. The presentation slides for the evening were circulated to all Members on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2022. Members were advised that once the presentation had concluded, the Committee Members would be given the opportunity to ask their questions of the Cabinet Members and officers first, followed by questions from the non-Committee Members (as part of the wider Member Development Programme).

Councillor G Butland, Leader of the Council, was then invited to introduce the report on

the Council's Budget position. In his opening speech, Councillor Butland mentioned that the papers which comprised the report for the evening had been produced before the commencement of the Local Government Finance Settlement, the results of which were still being analysed, with changes expected to emerge. Councillor J McKee, Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Transformation, presented the remaining slides.

The presentation slides were available to view on the Council's website via the following link: [braintree.cmis.uk.com/braintree/Meeting](http://braintree.cmis.uk.com/braintree/Meeting)

The full presentation and subsequent discussion with Members was available to view on the Council's YouTube Channel: <http://www.braintree.gov.uk/youtube>

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members and officers involved in the preparation of a comprehensive budget report.

The information below was subsequently provided in response to the questions raised by Members of the Performance Management Scrutiny Committee:-

- With regard to the funding for Councillor Community Grants, Members were advised that there was no obligation or statutory responsibility on the Council to return any monies to Parish and Town Councils. This was in part due to the fact that Parish and Town Councils maintained their own reserves, and also as there were a number of Councillor Grant monies which were made out to Parish and Town Councils.
- The proposed reduction in Councillor Community Grants to £1k was made following a review of the overall expenditure of each Councillor. Whereas some Councillors were able to spend their Grant monies over the year, it was acknowledged that there were others who struggled, and as a result it was felt that £1k was a more realistic figure. Members were reminded that they had the ability to pool such funds towards any larger scale projects, and that County Councillors also had access to a degree of community funding allowance. It was added that expenditure in respect of Councillor Community Grants would continue to be monitored and that there would be the opportunity for a review in subsequent years.
- In respect of the ICT Services and infrastructure upgrade of £563k, Members were advised that several options had been explored, which included migrating servers to the I-Cloud. It was highlighted that Local Authorities used very specific systems which were unique to them in terms of integration, and that such a move to the I-Cloud was considered to be of too high a risk at the current time; however, this option would be reviewed again in future.
- Members were reassured that although there were a number of uncertainties (e.g. future Government settlement funding, potential impacts of the Levelling Up White Paper, etc), all risks posed to the Council were given sufficient assessment throughout the Budget process. It was added that the Council was thought to be in a healthier position financially than many other Local Authorities.
- The proposed budgetary allocation of £209k towards Planning Enforcement was necessary in order to bring the performance of the team in line with the Authority's expected standards. Although it was highlighted that the four officers who comprised the team were exemplary within their roles, the resources of the team were very limited against the amount of work that was required. In response to a myriad of comments and complaints received about the Planning Enforcement service, the

Council was now conducting a thorough, internal review of the service. Discussions were also taking place as part of the Member Reference Group (MRG). It was noted that although some of the emerging from the review would not require additional funding, they would require officer time (e.g. to re-draft the Enforcement Plan). Furthermore, the number and complexity of enforcement cases received by the team had markedly increased over the last year, and this included High Court cases, which were extremely unusual and time consuming by nature to deal with. The funding requested would therefore allow the Council to appoint further officers who could support the overall work of the team and assist with more complex cases in future.

- With regard to Council Tax and how the increase of 2.68% had been derived, Members were advised that there was still a significant budget gap (£1.2million) in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that needed to be reduced over the next few years. Unless there was a Council Tax increase in the current year, the budget gap would be larger in future years.

The Chairman then gave non-Committee Members the opportunity to address their questions to the Cabinet Members. During the discussion, a number of Members stressed the importance of the Councillor Community Grants Scheme and requested that Cabinet gave consideration towards either returning the amount allocated per Councillor to £1,500 or a compromise of £1,250 per Councillor.

The following information was provided in response to questions raised by non-Committee Members:-

- On the subject of air quality monitoring, the Cabinet was not aware of any legislation that stipulated that the Council was required to monitor levels of mercury, or anything of a similar nature, in offices. Such an exercise would be costly to the organisation and would also need to be evidence based. Councillor Mrs W Schmitt, Cabinet Member for Environment and Place, agreed to speak to the relevant officers in order to understand if there were any issues.
- Members were reminded of the air quality review that was announced at the meeting of Full Council in September 2021. The exact details around the two new air quality monitors (e.g. their locations) would be incorporated within this review.
- With regard to climate change initiatives and any new community woodlands for the District, it was highlighted that there was a proposed budgetary allocation for a 'programme officer' who would be able to provide specific support towards the implementation of the Climate Strategy. Members were also reassured that the Council's current activities in respect of air quality monitoring were in line with DEFRA policies and requirements for the area.
- In respect of capital bids, it was recognised that consultation with Members would be beneficial and that the timing of such an exercise would be key; for example, if this should be in line with the budget timetable, and if that would provide enough time for Council to evaluate the responses. It was therefore proposed that in 2023, consideration be given towards consultation with Members on capital projects as a policy going forward, with enough time allowed for the inclusion of any feedback within the plans for the MTFS and Budget (i.e. start of the Civic Year).
- In instances where there was carry over in respect of Councillor Community Grants, these monies would be carried over to the individual Councillor. However, Members

were encouraged to work together to use their grants should they find it difficult to identify areas for spend, such as towards wider schemes for local areas.

- Members were advised that the £100k allocated over two years towards supporting the Council's Cycling Strategy was divided across the Authorities (£50k per Authority). It was hoped that the joint resource would allow for swifter development of any business cases and the introduction of any cycling initiatives.
- The Investment and Development Programme (IDP) was across the Authority in order to identify a pipeline of projects to achieve additional income and/or cost reductions to address the anticipated medium-term budget gap.
- Two of the new posts which were being proposed for the Planning team were for a Planning Technician Officer and a Compliance Officer. The officers appointed to each post respectively would be required to monitor approved conditions, either by officers under delegated authority, or as the result of an application being brought before Planning Committee. The Planning Technician Officer would be required to track the progress of developments on major sites in order to ensure that this was done in a timely manner, whereas the Compliance Officer would be responsible for undertaking site visits. A review of the Council's 'Enforcement Portal' would also be undertaken in future to ensure that information on the site was robust and up to date.
- Members were reassured that the IT Systems used by the Council were modern systems and utilised by many other Local Authorities. At such a time when the costs became acceptable and in line with the Council's budgets, consideration would once again be given towards migrating the systems over to the Cloud.
- Members were politely requested not to re-submit any historic Planning Enforcement related complaints, as it was emphasised that any complaints which had already been submitted were being processed by officers in the team. It was acknowledged that there were a small number of outstanding matters, but this was largely due to the complexity of those issues and the need for officers to seek legal advice.
- The 'Mosaic' software was widely used by a variety of Local Authorities, as well as by marketing and IT companies. The data that was fed into the software was obtained from multiple sources and from multiple locations; diligent management of the system was therefore required in order to avoid any data falsities.
- The Council's recycling service prioritised house-to-house waste collections. Other types of recyclates could be taken to waste centres such as the one at Springwood Drive, in Braintree. It was added that further 'recycling' sites could potentially be looked at in future.
- Parish Councillors were able to apply for the Councillor Grants Scheme on behalf of non-constituted groups within their local areas. Members were also reminded that many Parish Councils had untapped reserves which should be utilised.
- With regard to the Queen's Jubilee, no specific budgetary allocations had currently been made, although the Council was giving consideration towards any modest provisions that would help to commemorate the occasion, and would welcome any ideas from Members in this regard. It was added that the Authority was liaising with the Marketing and Communications team as to the most appropriate action to commemorate the Jubilee. Members would be updated in due course.

- 'Earmarked reserves' were monies set aside by Councils for specific purposes. It was added that Members would have the opportunity to submit any suggestions that they had for amendments to these reserves.
- Members were assured that along with physical improvements to the town centres in Witham and Halstead, the Council would look to arrange future events of a similar scale to that of the Christmas Light Switch On event in Braintree, with the aim of helping to increase footfall in the District's towns.
- In respect of reserves, Members were advised that the Council followed the rules and guidelines of CIPFA in the development of its Treasury Management Strategy, the Strategy of which was dependent on the Authority retaining a significant level of reserves.
- With regard to the Council's Investment and Development Programme and further opportunities that could be identified around this, technologies such as "blockchain" had not yet been evaluated for use. On this subject, it was added that the Council followed a continual process as part of its Digital Strategy which included supporting the "Digital Customer" by improving access to services through the use of technology, and the "Digital District," which revolved around supporting sustainable growth.

Further to the questions raised, it was agreed that the following written response would be provided:-

- Councillor G Butland agreed to provide a written response to the Chairman in respect of legislation around the re-payment of precepts to Parish and Town Councils.

Further to the discussion, the Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members and officers involved in the preparation of a comprehensive budget report. The Chairman also expressed his gratitude to the Leader, Cabinet Members and all other Members present for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

**DECISION:** That Members:

- 1) Noted the provisional updates to the General Fund Financial Profile and MTFS, and;
- 2) Noted the revised approach and timetable for the 2022/23 Budget process.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To provide a summary of the progress to date on updating the General Fund Financial Profile and Medium-Term Financial Strategy for the period 2022/23 to 2025/26 (MTFS).

The report also outlined a change in approach to the budget consultation process conducted through the Performance Management Scrutiny Committee, including a revised timetable.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 9.43pm.

Councillor M Radley  
(Chairman)