

Performance Scrutiny Committee's Commentary on the Revised Budget 2020/21

The Performance Scrutiny Committee considered the Revised Budget for 2020/21 at a special meeting on 13 August 2020. The Committee considered the savings and revisions to the revenue budget and provided the following comment for consideration by Cabinet:

General points:

- A number of Committee members and speakers expressed concern that the proposed savings identified would not be re-instated and may result in poorer delivery of services, particularly where this related to vacant staffing posts
- Committee members asked for an equalities impact assessment to be prepared on the budget proposals as it was felt that there was not clear enough evidence that any potential negative impacts on equalities had been fully considered

The following points were raised in relation to specific Directorates savings proposals:

Children, Education and Families:

The Committee noted that there is likely to be an increase in demand for Children, Education and Family service once schools re-open in September and the Committee remains concerned that the proposed savings may make it difficult if there is a rise in demand. In particular, given that the SEND Inspection had highlighted where the Council still needed make improvements, the Committee was particularly concerned to see any savings proposed in this area.

Strong concerns were expressed about the proposed £175,000 reduction of the Youth Fund that was agreed by Council in February. Members noted that this funding had been agreed in order to undertake a feasibility study to re-establish Council run youth services. Whilst the Cabinet Members advised that the assessment would still be undertaken at a reduced cost, this was not in line with the wishes of Councillors in relation to the funding agreed by Council in February and expressed concern that the work would not deliver the vision for youth services that had been anticipated.

Finally, in relation to the proposed Family Safeguarding Model transformation savings the Committee noted that the service had only recently been reconfigured and questioned why these figures were not identified as part of the last budget setting process.

Adult Social Care:

The Committee queried the rationale behind reconfiguring the Didcot Area Community Support Service and sought reassurances that this would not lead to unmet demand or a wider reconfiguration of Community Support Services.

The Committee also sought reassurances that care homes and care providers would be involved in any fair cost of care exercises in relation to savings in demand management.

Public Health:

In relation to vacancy management proposals, the Committee queried whether this would potentially result in a lack of capacity within the Directorate in the event of a second peak or moving into the winter flu season. The Committee were reassured that the saving related to the first six months of the year and that the vacancies were being recruited to.

The Committee also noted that the Council is due to receive additional grant in relation to Test and Trace and has requested a report about how this funding will be used to create resilience across the public health system.

Community Operations:

Councillors questioned the rationale behind delaying the implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement. Parking enforcement is often reported as an issue of concern by the public and as such the Committee do not wish to see any delay on the overall project timescales.

The Committee also sought a number of reassurances that local road maintenance programmes and vegetation cutting programmes would not be delayed or have funding diverted in order to support the implementation of the Emergency Active Travel schemes.

Finally, the Committee sought to understand whether there was likely to be an increase in Home to School Transport costs from September onwards with staggered school start times and the need to maintain appropriate social distancing measures. The Committee were pleased to hear that the government has pledged an extra c£500,000 for home to school transport costs in the Autumn Term.

Place and Growth:

Concerns were expressed by a number of Committee members about the delay in implementing Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs). For the proposed scheme at Didcot, the Committee sought assurances that officers would continue to work closely with partners as it was closely linked to HIF funding applications.

Community Safety:

The Committee queried whether the proposal to delay recruitment to the traffic enforcement team would potentially impact on HGV inspections and enforcement and noted that there may be a reduction in impact, but the Council still intends to carry out enforcement activity.

Customers and Organisational Development:

There were no specific concerns raised in this particular Directorate, but clarity was sought over terminology used in the Museums proposal around contributions to the British Museum.

Commercial Assets and Development:

The Committee expressed concerns over delays in implementing the Climate Action plan and requested that a report on the future of remote working and making more effective use of Council assets post-COVID-19.