

PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 6 December 2024 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 2.15 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Eddie Reeves - in the Chair

Councillor Bob Johnston - Deputy Chair

Councillor Brad Baines

Councillor Arash Fatemian

Councillor Kieron Mallon

Councillor Ian Middleton

Councillor Calum Miller

Councillor Glynis Phillips

Other Members in Attendance:

Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council

Cllr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment and Future Generations

Cllr Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services

Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management

Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services

Cllr Nathan Ley, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety

Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance

Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member Infrastructure and Development Strategy

Officers:

Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer

Ansaf Azhar, Director of Public Health and Communities

Cherie Cuthbertson, Director of HR and Cultural Change

Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services

Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways

Karen Fuller, Director of Adult social Care

Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services

Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety

Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place

Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships

Paul Grant, Head of Legal
Louise Tustian, Director of Transformation Digital and
Customer Experience
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Manager
Ben Piper, Democratic Services Officer

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

40/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Haywood.

41/24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS
(Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Middleton made a declaration of interest, during the discussion on Environment and Highways budget proposals, as the portfolio holder for recycling at Cherwell District Council.

42/24 MINUTES
(Agenda No. 3)

The minutes from the 15 November 2024 meeting were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record subject to suggested amendments tabled by the Director of Property and Assets.

43/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS
(Agenda No. 4)

There were none.

44/24 INDICATIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2025/26 TO 2027/28
(Agenda No. 5)

All Cabinet Members and Directors were invited to attend and present their relevant areas of the indicative budget proposals 2025/26 to 2027/28.

i. Budget Overview & Questions

Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, and Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and section 151 Officer, presented an overview of the proposed budget for 2025/26 to 2027/28 and answered questions.

The Leader reported a £25 million budget gap for the year 2025-2026. However, a number of potential sources of income, including being permitted to raise the level of council tax beyond the budgeted 1.99% would close this gap. The council was considering raising council tax beyond 1.99% and sought the Committee's advice on this matter. The rise in National Insurance contributions also represented a significant demand on the Council resources. Notwithstanding these pressures, the Leader highlighted additional funds allocated to the capital budget to address highway issues, identified as a key issue by residents.

The Cabinet Member for Finance stated that the proposals were designed to respond to public consultations, particularly concerning road improvements. They also noted the importance of meeting statutory duties in the budget, such as caring for children and adults, which consumed a significant portion of the revenue budget. The Cabinet Member clarified that the Council would prioritise the statutory duties over non-statutory objectives.

The Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer presented the key pressures and changes to income sources to the Committee. The 2025/26 indicative budget approved by Council in February 2024 showed a £13.9 million deficit, however contained within that is £15.9 million for inflation and £15.7 million for demographic changes in adults' and children's services. As part of the Autumn Budget, key funding sources included £1.3 billion for local government services, of which £600 million was for social care and £700 million was unringfenced. The distribution of funding was to be based on deprivation, potentially reducing Oxfordshire's usual share. Council tax flexibilities and locally retained business rates increase spending power by 3.2% at a national level.

Council tax was explained to potentially increase beyond 1.99%, up to 4.99%, which would assist with the budget gap. Oxfordshire's share of £500 million for road maintenance was pending, and there may have been a £4.5 million boost for bus services. Whilst being received from 2025/26 funding for extended producer responsibilities would become clearer from 2026/27 when producers have responded to packaging requirements.

Employers' national insurance was to rise to 15% and the national living wage to £12.21, increasing the Council's budget pressures. The Household Support Fund however was to gain a billion pounds for 2025/26. Inflation was anticipated to stay above 2%, gradually decreasing until 2028. Details around outstanding funding sources were expected by December's end. Starting in 2025/26, a targeted funding reform approach was to be aligned with the Local Government finance settlement principles, based around lower needs and higher fund-raising abilities.

Members questioned what the Executive Director 's (Resources) opinion was on whether Council tax should be increased to its maximum, what the benefits and potential repercussions may be. Members were advised that the maximum council tax increase was the best approach. The Executive Director of Resources and section 151 Officer explained that once the increase was in the base, the funding was secured, and if a lower increase was to be chosen, the council could never catch up on the lost funding.

Members asked about the impacts of National Insurance changes for both directly engaged staff and third-party staff. The impact for directly employed staff was about £3.9 million, and the total estimated at £8.2million. It was clarified that the government had committed to funding the cost for directly employed staff but not for third-party providers.

Members asked about the cost impact of the National Living Wage increase and whether the £25 million gap in the budget included the known increases for National Insurance and National Living Wage for direct employees. They also inquired if the budget assumed government support for these increases. The Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer clarified that the budget did not assume any government funding for the National Insurance contributions, as the details were still unclear. It was also mentioned that the previously agreed budget already included an increase for the National Living Wage, which was expected to cover the announced increase in costs, particularly in adult social care.

Members asked for clarification on how the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) estimates for the next year were accounted for, given the £1 billion provided by the government. They wanted to understand if this meant the council would not need to use reserves in the coming year. It was explained that Oxfordshire's share of the £1 billion was expected to be around £9 million. However, the in-year deficit for high needs was approximately £21 million, so the additional funding would not eliminate the deficit. Emphasis was placed on the funding distribution being based on the existing distribution formula rather than current spending, which would have been more beneficial for targeting overspending areas.

Members asked if the continuation of the New Homes Bonus, which was confirmed to be £1.7 million, was factored into the £25 million shortfall. It was confirmed that the £1.7 million from the New Homes Bonus was not included in the £25 million shortfall and did not assume any continuation in funding.

ii. Community Safety

Cllr Nathan Ley, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety, and Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, presented and answered questions on the Community Safety section of the budget proposals.

The Cabinet Member for Public Health noted a high public satisfaction with the Fire and Rescue service and mentioned a slight budget increase despite challenges in response times and recruitment. The Chief Fire Officer discussed savings from revised standby procedures and future plans to focus on fire engine availability and a new operating model by early 2026. Budget pressures included a £200K rise due to a national communication platform upgrade and costs for maintaining emergency response resilience during workforce shortages.

The Committee asked for more details about the use of a third-party provider being considered to fill gaps in the Fire and Rescue service during times of significant absence, such as industrial action or pandemics, querying whether a third party was suitable to fulfil such a role. The Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety

explained that they were currently considering a third-party provider, similar to the contract currently held by Royal Berkshire with Securitas. This provider would ensure the availability of fire engines and firefighting capabilities during significant absences. The provider would have personnel ready to crew fire engines, and the Fire and Rescue service would provide the necessary training to these individuals.

Members asked how the new approach to fire engine availability was considered a saving, and they also inquired about the progress on hydrogen-fuelled fire engines. It was explained that the savings came from reducing the number of additional hours and overtime needed to crew fire engines. By focusing on ensuring the availability of fire engines in specific geographical areas rather than maintaining a total number, they could be more efficient. This involved reallocating resources to ensure that at least some fire engines were always available in key areas, reducing the need for extensive overtime.

It was discussed that the fire service was involved with the development of an electric fire engine with a hydrogen range extender. The fire engine was scheduled to be built and expected to arrive early next year. The county council were also working on a hydrogen production facility in Drayton to support this initiative.

ACTION: The Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety to provide more information on how these measures might impact people with disabilities, mature employees, and those who were pregnant.

iii. Resources and cross cutting proposals

Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services, Cllr Dan Levy, Cabinet Member for Finance, Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships, Vic Kurzeja, Director of Property and Assets, Ian Dyson, Director of Financial and Commercial Services, Cherie Cuthbertson, Director of HR and Cultural Change, and Louise Tustian, Director of Transformation Digital and Customer Experience, attended to present and answer questions on the Resources section of the budget proposal.

The Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services highlighted ongoing organisational changes, especially management delayering, to align with current priorities. These changes were progressing well and should enhance performance and save staffing costs. It was noted there were no significant new expenditures in the budget.

Members asked about IT savings and other savings related to recovering duplicate payments. Specifically, they inquired about lessons learnt from not achieving these savings and the confidence in other forecasted savings within the context of ongoing corporate reforms.

The project to recover duplicate payments had ended, which was why the savings were no longer in the budget. It was not a failure but a conclusion of the project. Officers highlighted that lessons learned included understanding why duplicates occurred and working with partners to manage this better in the future. Cabinet

members and Officers expressed confidence in achieving the forecasted savings through a more systematic approach and better contract management.

Members asked about the £775,000 provided for the Councillor Priority Fund, how it was to be allocated among the 69 councillors, following the May County Council Election, and whether the amount was to be split over two years. It was explained that the fund was based on a realistic estimate of what would be spent, considering that not all councillors spend their full allocation. The figure was intended to be split over two years, with a slight reduction in the amount per councillor. Further clarification confirmed that the amount was £10,000 per councillor over two years, simplifying the calculation.

Members inquired about the £5 million savings figure from reduction in contract and third party spend, specifically asking where this figure came from, the constraints involved, and how achievable it was and as target. Cabinet Members explained that the £5 million was a reasonable estimate based on advice from the officer team. It was part of a systematic approach to using the council's strength in the marketplace to deliver better value from contracts. The Director of Financial and Commercial Services added that the savings were achievable through forensic work across all directorates, improving contract management, and reducing off-contract spend. The approach involved a detailed review of spending and leveraging the council's position as a reliable customer.

Members expressed concern over the proposed cuts to voluntary services about the proposed £200,000 cut from the voluntary service budget and sought clarity over which services were to be cut.

It was clarified that the intention was not to cut any services but to streamline the commissioning process to achieve savings, making the process more efficient rather than reducing the services provided.

Members asked if there was a need to reorganise the cabinet portfolios to align with the directorates, given the proposed new staffing changes. The Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services indicated that the redesign of the staffing structure was aimed at aligning with the council's current and future needs rather than just the current administration's political priorities. Assurances were made that there was no intention to realign the cabinet with the directorates. The current relationship between cabinet members and officers was working well, and there was no need for changes.

iv. Law & Governance

Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services, and Paul Grant, Head of Legal, attended to present and answer questions concerning the law and governance budget.

Introducing this section, the Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services identified the main aim as stabilising staffing within the law and governance department, particularly on the legal side. Success in stabilising staffing had already

led to fewer vacancies. From a budget perspective, reducing vacancies was not beneficial, but it was positive for the stability and delivery of services.

The Head of Legal also summarised the budget with an emphasis on the flexibility in recruitment efforts to address the competitive market for legal professionals. The council had introduced apprenticeships, with four apprentice solicitors and two apprentice paralegals joining in September. The strategy of "growing our own" aimed to fill difficult-to-recruit positions in areas like social care law. Despite ongoing challenges, the council was actively working to reduce reliance on locums and agency staff.

Members questioned whether the legal teams were up to full strength, given past frustrations with vacancies affecting casework completion. The Head of Legal explained that the legal teams were not yet at full strength but were closer than they had been in a long time. Efforts were ongoing to fill remaining vacancies, and the output of the team had increased, helping to catch up on backlogs.

v. Environment & Highways

Cllr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment and Future Generations, Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member Infrastructure and Development Strategy, Cllr Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, and Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, attended to present and take questions on the Environment and Highways section of the budget proposals.

The Cabinet Member for Transport management introduced the proposals, explaining that they would address revenue pressures through efficient working, maximising income use, and capital investment from central government, despite the investment being about 50% less than needed. Proposed investments included improving transport infrastructure through specific projects and focused programs, plus significant revenue for annual gully cleaning to enhance flood resilience. Detailed support aligned with Council ambitions and policies in Local Transport Connectivity Plan (LTCP).

The Deputy Leader addressed the issue of waste, explaining the main pressure had been increased tonnage due to population growth. Government's extended producer responsibility (EPR) was to provide £1.2 billion from a packaging tax, which was to go to councils. Additionally, a carbon tax was being introduced for the Ardley Waste-to-Energy plant. There were also costs associated with repairing, stabilising, and upgrading Redbridge to comply with health and safety standards, as well as addressing flooding, which local flood authorities managed.

Members inquired about the rationale for the specific breakdown of the capital programme, particularly the allocation for active travel and market town improvements. They raised concerns about whether this allocation aligned with the Council's goal of reducing car journeys by 2050, especially given the substantial budget for the Watlington Relief Road.

The Cabinet Member for Transport Management explained that the budget line was appropriate, as it encompassed active travel schemes and enhancements for market towns. Removing traffic from the centre of towns like Watlington significantly benefitted them. The road project was necessary to support new housing and included elements such as cycling and walking paths, pedestrian crossings, and bus provisions, collectively promoting active travel and reducing car usage.

Members inquired about the allocation of funds from the EPR scheme, specifically how much of the money would go to the districts as collection authorities and how much would be allocated to the County Council (OCC). It was clarified that the majority of the EPR funds would go to the districts. The County Council was expected to receive around £5 million. However, the exact figure and grant conditions were still being determined, and the funds would be used on a one-off basis in 2025-26 for projects to increase recycling or assist with packaging changes.

Members sought to clarify whether the decision to increase the regularity of gully and drainage clearing reversed reductions made by a previous administration. Officers confirmed that the new policy indeed reversed the previous administration's decision. The current approach, which was risk-based and averaged gully cleaning every four years, would continue to be risk-based but average cleaning annually. The increased frequency aimed to mitigate flooding risks and improve overall drainage maintenance.

Members inquired about the £1.1 million cost resulting from the delay in the government authorising the council's lane rental request, seeking clarity on the reasons for the delay. The delay was due to bureaucratic processes and ongoing negotiations with the government. The initial assessment by the Department for Transport (DfT) was postponed because of the general election. Additionally, the council needed to perform further work on data concerning the traffic-sensitive streets network. The council planned to complete this work and resubmit it to the DfT by January.

Members inquired about the four nationally strategic infrastructure projects mentioned in the budget, whether significant growth assessments had been conducted, and if the funds previously allocated had been evaluated to keep pace with inflation. The Cabinet Members and Officers explained that the four nationally strategic infrastructure projects were the Botley West Solar Farm, the SESRO reservoir scheme, East West Rail, and the strategic rail interchange. The council was keen on ensuring that growth assessments were part of the strategy for market towns, and while funding was not as extensive as desired, it was included in the strategies to secure future funding opportunities.

Members asked about the new capital commitments around highways maintenance, the impact of previously unannounced grant funding on the budget, and the intended lifespans of the maintenance schemes. Officers explained that the council welcomed the additional funding from the government, which was expected to be around £8-9 million. This funding would be incorporated into the budget to maintain a steady state of highways. The intended lifespan of the maintenance schemes was not explicitly known, but the council aimed to use the latest technology to ensure longevity. The

additional capital investment was expected to prevent potholes and reduce pressure on the revenue budget.

Members also inquired about the progress on opening the Cowley branch line for passengers. The Leader mentioned a positive meeting with Lord Hendy, where the case for the Cowley branch line was presented. The Committee was informed that Sir John Bell also supported the project strongly. The council was hopeful that funding would be allocated in the spring budget.

Members expressed concerns and inquired about the prudential borrowing allocated for priority capital schemes, including highways maintenance, and the implications when these funds were depleted. The council could be deemed to be incurring additional debt to continue maintaining the roads due to insufficient government funding. The proposed borrowing would take the council's debt to the maximum recommended level, as recommended by the section 151 Officer, which was equivalent to 5.5% of the net revenue budget. It was suggested that this borrowing strategy aimed to address the funding gap and ensure that the roads were maintained in their current condition.

Members inquired whether there was a limit to the size of the capital programme, particularly in light of potential government funding for significant infrastructure projects. Cabinet Members and Officers clarified that, apart from borrowing requirements, the primary constraint on the capital programme's size would be the council's capacity to implement the schemes. It was important to account for contingency plans to address inflation, delays, and any potential disruption to residents. Although the council has not yet reached its delivery capacity, it was essential to strike a balance between the effects on both capital and revenue.

ACTION: for the Director of Environment and Highways to provide the committee with a list of bridges at risk of structural failure or closure.

vi. Economy and Place

Cllr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment and Future Generations, Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member Infrastructure and Development Strategy, Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, and Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place, attended to present and take questions on the economy and place section of the budget proposals.

The Deputy Leader presented the budget proposals for Economy and Place, noting a short-term funding deficit for retrofit staff despite government grants. Supply chain management was needed to support long-term carbon sequestration for the Council's net zero 2030 goal and suggested pre-purchasing carbon offsets to mitigate rising costs. The Energy Efficiency Recycling Fund for schools, offering low or zero-interest loans to improve energy efficiency, enhance learning environments, and save money was oversubscribed and therefore being extended.

The cabinet member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy highlighted the plans to improve Market Squares and secure funding for these projects.

The Deputy Leader underscored the council's focus on innovative environmental strategies and the introduction of new funds to support energy efficiency projects. However, the ambitious goals also sparked a thorough examination of ongoing carbon sequestration efforts.

Concerns were raised by Members about the effectiveness and scale of current carbon sequestration efforts, referencing the thermodynamic challenges and the need for fundamentally new approaches. Officers had identified three main long-term carbon sequestration methods: biochar, enhanced weathering, and direct air capture, acknowledging the high energy requirements of direct air capture. The social cost of carbon was discussed, and the importance of starting small to stimulate supply chains and reduce costs over time.

Members questioned how the market towns for the Market Square improvements were identified and prioritised. It was explained that the identification process was part of the Area 2 strategies, which were still being worked on. Feasibility and improvements in local transport systems were major criteria in identifying market squares for improvement. Wantage was highlighted due to recent transport improvements, and other towns like Thame and Wantage were mentioned as part of the LCWIP. The progress depends on available funding, including 106 funding and other sources. The goal was to eventually improve all market towns to enhance social spaces and high street retail.

vii. Children's Services

Cllr John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services, Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement, and Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, attended to present the budget proposals for children's services.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services highlighted the directorate's broad scope, including education, children and families, youth services, and youth justice. The Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services noted higher resident satisfaction and survey results favouring budget increases. The uncertainty of Oxfordshire's share of SEND grants and late arrival of the Youth Justice Grant were noted as being potentially detrimental on safeguarding in Oxfordshire due to the uncertainty of funding. The Cabinet Member also mentioned Oxfordshire's growing population, budget needs for demographic changes, inflation, and social care costs. Progress on new small children's homes was discussed, along with Ofsted review delays affecting expected savings.

The Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement expressed appreciation for the additional £1 billion allocated to the high needs block nationally but stressed the need for clarity from government. The Cabinet Member highlighted a significant rise in educational health and care plans (EHCPs), increasing from 2,000 in 2014 to 7,500 in 2024. This growth necessitated additional staff, including caseworkers and educational psychologists, to comply with statutory timeframes. The budget had also been adjusted to include an extra £280,000 for educational psychologists.

The Director of Children's Services provided an overview for scrutiny, focusing on the impact of inflation, increased unpredictability, and new legislation from the Department for Education (DfE). The unpredictability in children's services was highlighted, particularly concerning demand, housing increases, and new DfE legislation. The Director discussed the "Working Together" arrangements and the "Keeping Children Safe and Helping Families Thrive" legislation, which necessitated investments in kinship care, preventative services, and early help. The expected service range increase due to population growth and new legislation was noted. Financial milestones were met, including efforts to keep more children at home with their families. The delays in the residential strategy and the national transfer scheme for vulnerable young people were acknowledged, impacting savings and placement responsibilities.

Members asked about the rising proportion of the budget spent on children's services compared to adult services and whether this balancing was reflected in statistical neighbours.

The Director of Children's Services confirmed that the increase in the children's services budget was not unique to Oxfordshire and was seen in statistical neighbours as well. It was explained that in some local authorities, the children's budget was larger than the adults' budget, depending on need. Oxfordshire's relative affluence affected its funding formulas, resulting in lower funding from central government for universal services through schools. It was noted that the impact of COVID-19, cost of living increases, and new legislation had driven the need for more investment in children's services. The Director highlighted that Oxfordshire's growing population also contributed to the increased demand for children's services. Overall, Oxfordshire's budget profile for children's services was in line with other local authorities, and no local authority was reducing their budget for children's services.

Members inquired about the impact of National Insurance contributions and the living wage on supplier contracts, noting that longer contracts in adult services might absorb these costs better than shorter contracts in children's services. The Director of Children's Services agreed that children's services contracts, especially for emergency placements, tended to be shorter, leading to more inflationary pressure compared to adult services. It was explained that children's placements were often commissioned through regional frameworks to help manage costs, though they still faced market pressures. Each child's care plan was tailored to their specific needs, making uniform cost management more challenging compared to adult services, which might use block contracts for certain populations. Additionally, managing the market for children's services involved coordination with multiple local authorities, adding complexity to cost management.

The Director of Children's Services elaborated on the comprehensive strategy to develop family hubs or children's centres across Oxfordshire. These hubs would offer a variety of services including parenting support, speech and language therapy, and school readiness programs. The Director highlighted the In Reach Outreach Program, which had had positive results in maintaining children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools. This approach had proven effective in reducing the need for more intensive and costly interventions by providing additional support to schools. Moreover, the initiative to offer

supplementary family support aimed to help manage children with complex needs within their homes, lowering the necessity for expensive out-of-home placements.

Members expressed concerns about cuts to the outdoor therapy service and asked about the search for an alternative provider. The Director for Children's Services clarified that the service involved a clinical and therapeutic team supporting children, including those in care and care leavers. The plan was to reorganise internally to align therapeutic services better, rather than removing services.

Members emphasised the importance of educational psychologists and inquired about their availability as well as the challenges associated with sourcing them. The Director of Children's Services explained that there was a significant shortage of trained and qualified educational psychologists, necessitating the need to source them through external agencies or as interim staff, to meet statutory requirements. With qualification for educational psychologists taking up to seven years, the council had implemented a pipeline that included apprenticeships and partnerships with universities to train and recruit educational psychologists. Additionally, they had introduced associate educational psychology positions to provide flexible work arrangements and attract qualified professionals.

Cllrs Miller and Fatemian left the meeting at this stage.

The Committee asked about the undeliverable savings of £2.8 million from the previous year and the confidence level in achieving budgeted savings in the next financial year. The Director of Children's Services explained that these undeliverable savings, stemming from the 2022-2023 budget, were incorporated into the current year's savings plan. The Director expressed confidence in achieving most of the agreed savings, despite issues such as delayed traction of residential homes having impacted savings. It was also noted that savings from the residential homes would likely start to show traction in the next financial year and certainly by 2026-2027.

Members inquired about the proposed investment in services for children under five years old, particularly in relation to the previous budget's investment in early intervention within mainstream school settings. The Director of Children's Services clarified that the investment was intended to enhance school readiness, parenting support, and speech and language services. The plan was to establish a cohesive framework of family assistance across the county, collaborating with partners and stakeholders, including schools, early years settings, and health services. The objective was to provide a consistent range of support for parents and children, thereby fostering early development and preventing future issues.

Members concluded by addressing the issue of EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) numbers. They inquired about the total number of EHCPs, the annual rate of increase, and potential strategies to gradually reduce this growth and enhance the system's sustainability.

The Director of Children's Services explained that the local authority was responsible for assessing needs and formulating EHCPs when appropriate, and that they could not limit the number of assessments. The success of the In Reach Outreach programme was highlighted, demonstrating significant impact by helping more

children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) integrate into mainstream schools. Additional measures included the Enhanced Pathways programme to support schools in managing children with SEND, as well as investments in early intervention and prevention support for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO).

The Committee broke for a 30-minute lunch at 12:53.

viii. Public Health

Cllr Nathan Ley, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety, Cllr Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services and Ansaf Azhar, Director of Public Health and Communities, attended to present the budget proposals for public health.

The Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services introduced budget proposals for public health, highlighting the use of libraries as community hubs integrating services like health visiting. The Cabinet Member emphasised the Home Library Service for vulnerable individuals supported by volunteers and schemes to encourage children's reading, such as Bookstart. Recent and upcoming library refurbishments in Goring, Henley, Whitney, and Banbury aim to improve community facilities. The Director of Public Health reinforced the goal of making libraries natural community hubs by co-locating services like health and social care within these spaces.

The Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety also noted the relevance of the ring-fenced public health grant for the effective delivery of statutory services. This included NHS health checks, drug and alcohol services, and other initiatives aimed at promoting healthier lifestyles and supporting the NHS. The role of public health in aiding other Council services, such as adults and children's services, was also highlighted to enhance overall community health and well-being.

The Director of Public Health emphasised that achieving public health outcomes required the entire Council's involvement, not just the public health directorate. The Council's place-shaping strategy, Marmot place designation to tackle inequality, and well-being initiatives all contributed to this goal. These were crucial areas directly related to public health, not mere savings. There were aims to strengthen these areas and expand initiatives like community capacity grants and family solutions to ultimately reduce demand in the health and social care sector.

The discussion highlighted the critical use of public health funds for mental health, substance misuse programs, sexual health, and initiatives promoting healthier lifestyles. The ring-fenced public health grant ensured the delivery of statutory services such as NHS health checks, sexual health, drug and alcohol services, and health visiting services. Although the grant was confirmed annually, there was hope for multi-year settlements to improve long-term planning.

In addition, domestic abuse services received funding from a separate grant within the public health directorate. This funding was also confirmed annually, but its continuation beyond the current year remained uncertain. The council had

significantly increased its spending on domestic abuse services to £1.2 million, raising concerns about sustainability if the grants were not maintained.

Efforts were being made to demonstrate the impact of these services to secure future funding. For instance, an £800,000 physical activity program reduced GP appointments by 50%, and Alcohol Care Teams saved £300,000 annually by reducing emergency admissions. The council was actively engaging with stakeholders and partners to protect and expand preventative services based on evidence, aiming to ensure the sustainability of grants and long-term public health outcomes.

Members discussed the need for collaboration with NHS partners and how the budget supported this. Cabinet Members and Officers described how the council worked with partners to improve public health, emphasising that health was a cross-cutting issue. For instance, the Council's investment in the Health Inequality Forum had secured an additional £1.5 million from the NHS for inequality reduction. With a strong healthy place-shaping strategy and becoming a Marmot place, the council focused on tackling inequality. The Council had established a health impact evaluation unit to show the effectiveness of interventions like physical activity programs and alcohol care teams in reducing health demand and costs. These evaluations supported discussions with partners about sustaining and scaling up preventative services. The council was also moving towards four-year business plans for long-term planning and collaboration to address structural drivers of inequalities and improve public health outcomes.

Members questioned whether the approach of other councils to public health funding had been considered and whether the council was fully utilising opportunities for preventative and upstream work, especially in children and adult social care.

It was explained to the Committee that different councils took various approaches to public health, with some allocating money from the general fund to public health projects. The integration of public health into local authorities allowed for addressing social and wider determinants of health more effectively. The council had several initiatives aimed at preventative and upstream work, such as the Better Housing, Better Health program and climate and health interventions. The School Streets initiative had shown a positive impact on air quality, removing some areas from air quality management. The council's healthy place-shaping strategy was mature and aimed to strengthen public health outcomes across the system. The council was on a journey to improve cross-directorate collaboration and long-term planning to address structural drivers of inequalities.

ix. Adult Social Care

Cllr Bearder, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, and Karen Fuller, Director of Adult social Care, attended to present and answer questions on the adult social care section of the budget proposals.

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care presented budget proposals, noting that adult social care accounted for about 50% of the council's revenue expenditure. Highlighting the challenges of an aging population and lack of reform, the

"Oxfordshire Way" was emphasised as a cost-saving approach, as well as a key directorate aim, to enable people to live well at home. The importance of scrutinising costs and correctly allocating responsibilities between the council and NHS was stressed. The Council worked with providers to ensure good wages for carers and a high quality of service.

The Director of Adult Social Care emphasised the importance of partnership working with the system to achieve better outcomes and efficient use of resources. The Director highlighted the focus on maximising efforts to achieve the best value for money through collaborative efforts. The Director also discussed the innovative use of technologies to improve services and improve staff efficiency.

Members raised the issue of inflation and noted that it was an integral part of normal budget planning. It was also noted that Oxfordshire was among the highest payers for home care in the country. Members questioned how the inflationary pressures as well as the changes to national insurance and national living wage had been accounted for.

The Director of Adult Social Care emphasised that a key consideration was determining the appropriate figure for pay adjustment. They assured Members that the inflationary adjustments were within the current budget and forecast. No additional funds should be necessary. The Executive Director (Resources) and section 151 Officer also explained that the impact of employers' National Insurance on both direct staff and contractors was already included in the corporate budget changes.

Members asked about the effects of losing the discharge fund and its significance for the functioning of the NHS. It was stated that the discharge fund would continue next financial year but was awaiting confirmation of final figures. However, if the fund were discontinued, the Director noted that it would have a significant negative impact on the system.

Members requested clarification regarding the review of system contributions for mental health and other services. The Director of Adult Social Care explained that the Section 117 review involved working with health colleagues to ensure an equitable distribution of costs between health and social care for individuals discharged under the Mental Health Act. This is in line with legal responsibilities.

Members inquired about the packages related to double-handed care, the pace of reablement, and early intervention, and whether there were opportunities for the council to enhance efforts in these areas. Members also requested information on measures being taken to reduce double-handed care, particularly in light of the rising obesity rates.

The Director of Adult Social Services reported that they had prioritised reviewing home care services and implementing digital technology to enhance care delivery efficiency. They mentioned exploring innovative equipment and collaborating with occupational therapists to minimise the need for double-handed care.

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care further elaborated on optimising the utilisation of care staff, public health initiatives, including the 'Get Active Age Well' program, were highlighted as having yielded positive results by improving fitness levels and reducing the demand on care providers. Various grants and initiatives were also explored to enhance the quality of care while decreasing the burden on caregivers.

As referenced in the document, the Committee **AGREED** to the following actions:

- The Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety to provide more information on how these measures might impact people with disabilities, mature employees, and those who were pregnant.
- For the Director of Environment and Highways to provide the committee with a list of bridges at risk of structural failure or closure.

45/24 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN
(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** to the proposed forward work plan, with the Scrutiny Manager to investigate the value of including Councillor Inductions on the forward plan.

Members were encouraged to respond to the councillor induction survey.

46/24 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER
(Agenda No. 7)

The Action and Recommendation Tracker was **NOTED** by the Committee.

47/24 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 8)

There were none.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing