

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 28 January 2025

Scrutiny of Budget Proposals 2025/26 to 2027/28 Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and agree its response to them, for inclusion within the Council budget papers, and
 - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations. However, it is advised that in order to fulfil its duty to report to Council on how it has taken any recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee into account under Part 3.2 2(e) of the Constitution (Budget and Policy Framework and Procedure Rules), that it formally responds to the recommendations on receipt and issues these responses to Council.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee holds constitutional responsibility for providing Scrutiny of the Cabinet's budget proposals. Supported by a series of all-member briefings to inform all members of the budget and its context, the Committee has done so this year in two stages as

the budget proposals themselves have developed. On 06 December 2024, it considered an indicative set of budget proposals whilst the Council awaited important information around the Council's income, particularly the effect of the publication of the Local Government Finance Settlement and maximum permitted levels of council tax. Secondly, on 17 January 2025 the Committee considered an updated set of proposals. These proposals informed the Committee of changes following clarification over various income-sources including the Social Care Grant, and the new Children's Social Care Prevention Grant. Clarification was also provided on the funding available to cover the increase in Employer National Insurance, and the increase of the section 31 Grant for Business Rates Indexation to offset changes Business Rates income as part of the Settlement Funding Assessment.

4. The purpose of this report is threefold: i) to provide to Cabinet the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee's response to the budget proposals prior to deciding the details of the budget to be proposed at Council for ratification, ii) to inform members of Council of the issues identified by the Scrutiny Committee, and iii) to provide assurance to the public that the proposed budget has been subject to robust scrutiny and challenge.

5. The Committee would like to put its thanks on record to all Cabinet members and Directors for attending over the course of the two meetings, and particularly to the Leader, the Cabinet Member for Finance, and the Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director Resources (Section 151 Officer) for attending both meetings in their entirety.

SUMMARY

6. As referenced, the Committee's deliberations were undertaken across more than one meeting, with proposals developing as uncertainties over funding became clearer. It is, therefore, perhaps not helpful to go through the detail of scrutiny provided here. However, as it is one of the purposes of this report to provide public assurance that the budget proposals were subjected to sufficient scrutiny, a flavour of the breadth of topics explored by members in over five hours of scrutiny is detailed in the table below:

Budget Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The optimal level of council tax increase - Whether the Council had made sufficient provision for changes to National Insurance and the National Living Wage, and the service implications associated - The status of certain forms of government funding, such as the Dedicated Schools Grant and New Homes Bonus - Readiness for any potential expenditure relating to central government's devolution proposals
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Community Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The operational and resilience impacts of proposed fire service efficiencies - Progress towards hydrogen-powered fire engines
Resources/ Cross-cutting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lessons learned about previous unmet savings targets, and the level of realism of the Council's intended efficiencies through reducing contract and third party spend - How the Councillor Priority Fund would operate under new proposals - The impact on the voluntary sector of streamlining the commissioning process
Law and Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The progress towards having a full complement of permanent legal staff and the level of savings accruing from and service impacts of that.
Environment and Highways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The projects funded by capital expenditure, particularly in relation to active travel-related spend, and their prioritisation - How the Council would spend its income from central government's Extended Producer Responsibility levy - Cost impacts of delays to the Council's Lane Rental request to central government - The level of inflation protection included within proposals around nationally strategic infrastructure projects in the event they might be delayed - The progress of rail projects around the county - The efficacy of flood-prevention spending - Whether increases in charges on waste collection led to an increase in fly-tipping
Economy and Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The value for money of carbon sequestration at current scale, and alternative options - How Market Town funding was prioritised
Children's Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whether Oxfordshire's increase in spend on children's services was part of a national trend - How, practically, the development of family hubs would improve outcomes and improve efficiency - The challenges in recruiting educational psychologists and the Council's steps to develop its own - Whether unachieved savings were not going to be achieved, or simply delayed - Strategic approaches to upholding the Council's duty to perform Education and Health Care Plan assessments for children, and provide services for those requiring it, whilst reducing demand through prevention

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progress on increasing supply of local placements for children and reducing out of county expenditure - The reasons for the steepness of increases to school meal prices
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How Council investments in public health leveraged funding from other sources, such as the NHS - The balance of reactive and preventative activity in the spending proposals
Adult Social Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of National Insurance increases on third party providers, and the Council's readiness for this. - More information on how technology enabled savings - The correlation between the Council's proposals and the increases in council tax permitted specifically to fund adult social care - Levels of payment to social care providers and the robustness of local care market - The justification of particular fee increases

7. For those wishing more comprehensive detail the minutes of the meeting of [06 December 2024](#) are available online, as will be the minutes of the 17 January 2025 meeting prior to the Council's budget meeting.
8. The Committee makes five formal recommendations. Of these, only one seeks a change of course, specifically around the rate of increase for school meal charges. The rest simply seek additional information to ensure that members are better informed when they take their decision to set the budget. In addition, the Committee makes a broader set of observations, the purpose of which is to highlight important areas which it feels should not go unconsidered by members when agreeing the budget.

OBSERVATIONS

9. The budget round for this year included a number of positive surprises. A number of assumptions have proven to be conservative and income for the forthcoming financial year has tended towards the upside of projections. This includes a small increase to the Council Tax base and the level of increase in Council Tax permitted to be levied without a referendum, the continuation of the New Homes Bonus in 2025/26, and the continuation of the lately announced increase in 2024/25 and further increases in the Social Care grant which was not initially expected in the Medium Term Financial Plan approved in February 2024.

10. Over the medium term, however, the picture becomes gloomier. This is because the criteria for distributing funding from central government is expected to change, with levels of deprivation becoming an increasingly important guide, with Funding Reforms being introduced from 2026/27 based on up-to-date assessments of need and local resources. Despite pockets of significant deprivation, Oxfordshire overall as a county has low levels of deprivation¹. This is unambiguously a good thing. Nevertheless, it does mean that the Council is likely as long as this policy persists to see a reduction in income from a number of important government sources. This can be seen in the Council's lower share of the Social Care Grant (admittedly, from a larger overall pot, resulting in higher overall income). Members are encouraged, therefore, to remember that the positive surprises experienced this year will be outweighed by ongoing reductions in central government income in the future. Using the breathing space afforded by this temporary reduction in pressure to prepare the Council for more difficult years to come is imperative.

Observation 1: To recognise the anticipated adverse impact on the Council's income over the course of MTFS due to changes to the criteria for distributing Government grants, including an increased focus on deprivation

11. A further factor reinforcing the point above is the level of the Council's borrowing. Specifically, the budget proposals indicate that the Council should take on £65m Prudential Borrowing, the majority being allocated towards maintaining the Council's Highway Network. The s.151 Officer has determined that, at 5.5% of the net revenue budget, this would bring the Council to the maximum prudent level. Stating that, in order to maintain the current level of its road network, the Council is borrowing to maximum of that considered prudent is in no way a political point; rather, it is a recognition that the budget proposals are a balance in relative priorities. This reinforces the need for members to be assured that the Council is on the path towards future-proofing its budgets through wise investments, forensically managing costs, and generating income through commercial operations.

Observation 2: To recognise that the Council is borrowing as much as it may prudently do to fund capital expenditure

12. During discussions in committee, it was confirmed that Oxfordshire sits within the top five highest payers for adult social care support in the country. In light of the observations above, this might appear to be a negative thing. However, it is not necessarily so; one of the consequences is that the adult social care market locally is far more robust than in other places which operate finer margins. The benefits of this are to be seen in the ability to manage significant changes to the labour market, such as the recent increase by central government in the level of employer's National Insurance and the lowering of the salary threshold at which it becomes payable. For sectors such as social care, which has a high proportion of staff on relatively low pay, this is particularly challenging.

¹ The Council has developed a useful summary on this topic: https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20191004_bitesize_IMD2019overview.pdf

13. There are many ways to frame the benefits of a resilient social care market locally, but the Committee highlights the equality implications. The social care labour market, locally and nationally, skews heavily towards women². Likewise, there is a high preponderance for part-time working in the sector. Such are the type of roles which may not have previously attracted employer national insurance contributions previously, but now will. Whilst even in Oxfordshire there remains a need for technological and other efficiency improvements, the greater certainty and resilience of the local market purchased by paying higher rates allows providers to ride this wave more easily and with fewer redundancies, and therefore fewer detrimental impacts on both recipients of care and (mostly) female care professionals than those with tighter margins.

- **Observation 3: That there are likely equality impacts of National Insurance changes amongst external social care organisations**

14. In light of the significant flooding across Oxfordshire recently, including in the last year, the budget proposes to make significant investments in improving flood resilience. This includes the proposal to restore the annual cleaning of gullies, which had previously been reduced to a four-year cycle, and £2.1m in flood prevention. The Committee both welcomes this investment and recognises that the need will still significantly outweigh supply. One important and valued aspect of this funding, therefore, is the way it is expected to leverage matched funding from other stakeholders, such as the Environment Agency and Thames Water. Given the urgency and level of demand for improved flood resilience, multiplying the Council's investment through securing matched funding is critical.

15. To say that there is a surfeit of fundable projects is not to relieve the Council from the need to prioritise and plan rigorously. The Committee recognises the point made by the Deputy Leader with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations that having flexibility to move quickly where need is identified is important. However, it also recognises that leaning towards a flexible and reactive approach rather than a planned and strategic one can diminish the effectiveness and value for money of the interventions employed. It wishes to see particular effort, therefore, being made to ensure individual interventions sit cleanly within its wider strategic plan.

Observation 4: That the Council recognises the desire for additional – though targeted – spending relating to flood-measures, and the importance therefore in securing matched funding from other partners

16. The Committee's deep interest in the progress of the Cowley branch line is evidenced by the fact that it is amongst a small number of topics that was considered at both budget meetings. It welcomes the reports by the Leader of

² <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Adult-Social-Care-Workforce-Data/Workforce-intelligence/documents/State-of-the-adult-social-care-sector/The-state-of-the-adult-social-care-sector-and-workforce-in-England-2024-Executive-Summary.pdf>

positive meetings with the Minister of State for Rail. However, in discussions about the proposed provision in the budget of £1m to support the development of rail infrastructure it was confirmed that this money would primarily be used towards driving improvements to Oxford Station and moving the Cowley branch line forward. The Committee simply wishes to put on record that there are a number of other key areas within the county which are unserved by rail: notably Wantage/Grove but also, for example, Witney. Support for the Cowley branch line is not to be taken as support for deprioritising progress in improving rail infrastructure where it is also needed.

17. A related comment concerning the £1m provision for rail infrastructure development is the following. The Committee understands that the Council shows its commitment towards improving rail infrastructure in the county in providing its own money. The aim of doing so is to make Oxfordshire's proposals attractive for central government and private investment, leveraging the Council's input by significant multiples. The Committee is aware of this, but it does highlight two drawbacks: time, and uncertainty. Even from the perspective of national government, rail infrastructure requires investing significant sums and is slow to progress. The foundations on which the business case rests can change significantly over that time. The Council's proposed investment in rail is, relatively speaking, high risk and high reward but those benefits will only be felt in the future. In contrast, the benefits of investment in bus services are far more likely to be realised earlier, and can be felt immediately. The Committee highlights this choice between different means to reduce road congestion as a particularly important one and one which councillors should consider carefully.

Observation 5: That there is support for the development of the Cowley branch line and a new railway station at Wantage/Grove, but also that other rail projects need to be progressed. Nevertheless, investment in bus services may have more immediate and tangible benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. The primary target of this section of the report is the Cabinet, which is being asked to make a number of changes on the basis of the Committee's budget scrutiny.
19. As referenced in the summary, the Committee only calls for one significant change in policy: the speed of increases to prices in school meals. In the most recent proposals submitted to the Committee, the proposed changes to the Council's fees and charges included increases in charges to schools of providing school meals between 14-15%. The latest ONS data to be released concerning food inflation comes from October 2024, which shows the figure to be running at 1.9%.³ This is a notable increase at a time where food inflation is

³ [UK food inflation rate 2024 | Statista](#)

subdued. However, the Committee does recognise that staffing elements of the service face rising costs, not least through changes to national insurance.

20. Based on discussion at the committee, it is accepted that currently prices are low and they must rise. The Council did not raise prices significantly after a period where food inflation rose at one point to 19%. Not raising costs for schools (and thus potentially parents and carers) during a particularly challenging period of the cost of living crisis is commended. However, unless the quality of the food provided is to be reduced, the cost of inflationary pressures must be clawed back through higher prices. This requirement is also bolstered by the Cabinet Member for Finance's reminder that the Council is required not to run artificially-low prices, which could be seen as undercutting private enterprise.
21. The Committee's issue lies not with the aim of bringing charges for school meals back into balance with costs, but simply the pace of change. To make this rebalance in one go is to raise school meal costs at not far off the peak rate of food inflation. Whilst cost of living pressures have seemingly begun to ease and wages are currently increasing faster than inflation, this remains a large increase. Were schools to pass on this increase it would be one which would be felt, particularly by those on lower incomes but who do not qualify for free school meals. A 15% increase equates to buying an additional meal every week and a half. The Committee would prefer to see a more gradual adjustment over time. Although there is a small cost to the Council associated with not correcting the imbalance between prices and charges, 7.5% increases over two years or 5% increases over three years would be felt far less keenly by schools or, if passed on, paying parents and contributing carers. This is desirable in and of itself, but the absence of a price shock also makes it more likely that families will continue to use the school meals service overall. Concerns over accusations of unfair pricing for private enterprise are not expected to be significant; so long as the Council increases prices by higher than the rate of inflation then it will be improving on its current position in this regard.

Recommendation 1: That the increases for school meals are stepped over a longer period

22. The following recommendation is made partially with a view to the Council meeting should Cabinet not agree to recommendation 1. Being the only area of policy where the Committee is recommending a change, it does view the issue of school meal charges as important. As such, it deems that all members should be given the information they need to judge whether it is a policy they wish to see the Council adopt. The Committee asks, therefore, that the following information is provided with the final budget report to Council.

Recommendation 2: That the Council budget report provides members with i) the impacts of school meal price rises for parents with two children getting school meals every day over a year (assuming that the full increase in costs are passed on by schools), and ii) and the

anticipated savings to the Council made by increasing school meal prices

23. In the same vein, the Committee's view is that members would benefit from having more information concerning flood-prevention and the level of savings from DIY waste charges. The Committee's discussion (as will be detailed below) highlighted the importance of flood-prevention measures and, even if not all benefits of flood-prevention expenditure accrue to the Council, the committee deems it valuable to have a clearer understanding of the overall return on investment expected to be generated by a particular level of investment.
24. Equally, the Committee did discuss specifically the threat of higher levels of fly tipping if DIY waste charges are increased. The argument of the Deputy Leader with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations that fly tipping is primarily undertaken by criminal gangs who are not sensitive to price increases anyway is recognised. However, is there a threat that some on the margins might be tempted to fly tip for the first time as prices increase? The Committee wishes members to be able to balance the risk and reward of this particular calculation for themselves.

Recommendation 3: That the Council budget report includes a benchmark figure for the cost-avoidance accruing from the Council's proposed flood-prevention investment

Recommendation 4: That the Council budget report provides members with the financial impact to the Council of increasing DIY waste charges by 4.2%

25. One area of discussion in which particularly robust challenge was provided was the decision to classify capital expenditure on the Watlington Relief Road under 'schemes that encourage and facilitate active travel and improve market towns'. The Committee does recognise the Cabinet Member for Transport Management's argument that the reference is appropriate as it encompasses active travel schemes and enhancements for market towns. Removing traffic from the centre of towns like Watlington is of significant benefit. The road project is necessary to support new housing and includes elements such as cycling and walking paths, pedestrian crossings, and bus provisions, which collectively promote active travel and reduce car usage. Nonetheless, this issue has been reported on negatively online,⁴ and Active Travel England is not currently in a position to support the scheme and requests further assessment, evidence, revisions and/or dialogue.⁵
26. The Committee accepts that there is a degree of misunderstanding in some of the criticism made, specifically that the spending on the Watlington Relief Road supports active travel rather than is an active travel scheme. Nonetheless, headlines like 'Council slammed for raiding active travel funds'

⁴ ["It beggars belief": Council slammed for raiding active travel funds to build "unnecessary, damaging" new road in small town | road.cc](#)

⁵ [Calls for Watlington Relief Road plans to be deferred - BBC News](#)

indicates that there is further to go in communicating this difference to the public. It would appear that a segment, at least, understand the Council to have made higher commitments to active travel expenditure than is the case.

27. One suggestion by the Committee to address this is that the Council is clearer and more transparent about the frameworks it uses to weigh and value active travel within its decision-making. It is important that the Council can enumerate the outcomes it expects from active travel expenditure, how it values and weighs different outcomes, and how the impact of existing infrastructure and networks might leverage outcomes further as justifications for its expenditure.
28. In cases like the Watlington Relief Road, having a clearer framework would support the Council to delineate more clearly the costs and active travel outcomes purchased through that investment from the broader, non-active travel overall schemes. This would frame public expectations of these active-travel supporting schemes more realistically.
29. Further to this, however, the budget proposals also suggest '£1.3m for active travel measures to encourage walking and cycling will be added to the £0.5m for active travel in rural areas included in the December report.' Applying similar rigour to projects within this budget provision should ensure there is an evidenced and justified prioritisation, as well as drawing a direct link between the Council's expenditure and one of its key policy aims, to reduce motor journeys.

Recommendation 5: That the Council makes clear the framework through which projects will be prioritised for active travel spending, including consideration of the impact on numbers of people walking and cycling as well as the additional benefits of schemes being complementary as part of a network.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

30. The Committee is expected to return to its formal budget scrutiny process towards the end of 2025, once there are new proposals to scrutinise. In the meantime it will continue to monitor key aspects of the budget through its work programme.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

31. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'

32. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
33. Under Part 3.2 2 (e) of the Constitution (Budget and Policy Framework and Procedure Rules), the Cabinet shall take into account any recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee in finalising its [budget] proposals for submission to the Council for consideration. In submitting the proposals the Cabinet will report to the Council on how it has taken into account any recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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