

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Resources Scrutiny Commission



1 February 2024 at 4.00 pm

(Part 2 of meeting: scrutiny of 2024/25 budget proposals)

Resources Scrutiny Commission members present:

Cllr Geoff Gollop, Chair, Cllr Heather Mack, Vice-Chair, Cllr Mark Bradshaw, Cllr Martin Fodor
Cllr John Goulondris, Cllr Patrick McAllister

People Scrutiny Commission members present:

Cllr Christine Townsend, Cllr Kerry Bailes, Cllr Brenda Massey, Cllr Tim Wye

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board members present:

Cllr Andrew Brown

Cabinet members in attendance:

Cllr Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor for Children's Services, Education and Equalities
Cllr Helen Holland, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Integrated Care System

Officers in attendance:

Denise Murray, Director: Finance
Sarah Chodkiewicz Head of Finance Management
Reena Bhogal-Welsh, Director: Education and Skills
Fiona Tudge, Director: Children, Families and Safer Communities
Hugh Evans, Executive Director: Adult and Communities
Christina Gray, Director: Communities and Public Health
Ian Hird, Scrutiny Advisor

The meeting (part 1 of the meeting having been adjourned at 6.20 pm on 30 January 2024) reconvened at 4.00 p.m.

31 Welcome, introductions and safety information

The Chair welcomed all attendees to part 2 of this meeting.

Apologies for absence had been received as follows:

Cllr Tim Ripington, Resources Scrutiny Commission



Cllr Gary Hopkins, Resources Scrutiny Commission
Cllr Katja Hornchen, People Scrutiny Commission
Cllr Craig Cheney, Deputy Mayor for City Economy, Finance and Performance
Cllr Ellie King, Cabinet member - Public Health and Communities
Stephen Peacock, Chief Executive
Vanessa Wilson, Director: Children and Education Transformation

32 Scrutiny of 2024/25 budget proposals - part 2

The Commission considered the following aspects of 2024/25 budget proposals as approved at the Cabinet meeting held on 23 January 2024:

1. Children and Education directorate - proposed budget
2. Adult and Communities Directorate - proposed budget

1. CHILDREN AND EDUCATION DIRECTORATE - PROPOSED BUDGET

a. Commission members had submitted a pre-notified question in advance of the meeting. The response to this question was noted as follows:

Question: The supplementary estimate shows further deterioration from £11m at the end of October to aim at the middle of January. Does this all relate to DSG and the special needs block? Does it represent providing for the shortfall because of the pending statutory overdraft or is it something else?

Response: The supplementary estimate does not relate in any part to the DSG or the special needs (high needs) block. The supplementary estimate is to offset the Q3/P8 £18.5m pressure forecast that is General Fund and relates to pressure in Childrens Social Care placements and in Home to School Transport.

b. Summary of main points raised/noted in subsequent discussion:

1. Foster care

- a. There was a discussion during which members generally welcomed the action being taken to invest in and improve foster care. It was noted that actions being taken forward included:
- a drive to recruit significantly more foster carers, and where appropriate to consider additional, innovative approaches, e.g. in some cases, providing financial assistance to foster carers/prospective adopters to enable a home extension or provide suitable aids and adaptations, or in some cases resource the provision of a larger vehicle, where it was clear that long-term value for money and additional foster care through that additional investment could be assured.
 - participating in the regional foster care hub as part of a programme of offering holistic support to foster carers.
 - new campaigns to encourage the recruitment of new foster carers and action to support potential new foster carers as they progressed on their care 'journey' beyond the initial inquiry stage, and participation in the south west fostering retention and recruitment hub project.



b. It was noted that independent fostering agencies faced similar challenges around recruitment.

c. It was noted that individual councillors can have an important role in participating in any local foster carer recruitment campaigns.

2. Children's home placements

a. There was a discussion about the action that will continue to be taken to develop the in-house, local placement offer, including 'investing to save' opportunities to increase capacity and provide more local children's homes to reduce reliance on more expensive 'out-of-area' placements, noting that the children's home model is now based primarily on small-scale settings, i.e. no more than 1-3 children per home.

It was noted that:

- Demand for children's home placements continues to outstrip supply.

- Through the Council's Property Transformation Programme, property assets were notified to the Children's Services team as they became available in order that an assessment could be made about the potential to develop a pipeline of converting/re-purposing suitable Council owned properties.

b. It was noted that there was a market issue in Bristol as a number of providers regarded property prices in the city as very challenging.

c. It was noted that the membership of the Corporate Parenting Panel had been reviewed in the last year. It was suggested that it would be particularly important to engage with the new councillor intake after the forthcoming May 2024 elections so that all councillors were aware of the full scope of the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities.

d. In response to a question, it was noted that the Council had also grown and enhanced its kinship carer offer.

e. In further discussion, and noting that encouraging progress had been made by Adult Social Care in forecasting service demand, it was suggested that whilst accepting the inherent difficulty in accurately forecasting future demand for children's services, all possible action should be explored around any opportunities that arise for investment in robust forecast modelling, to try to improve predictions around demand and assist the planning of future services. In relation to Children's Services, it was noted that forecast graphs were produced currently in terms of examining different demand scenarios, and that the needs of children with complex needs and the cost of placements was also closely tracked. It was noted that improved forecast modelling (including tracking market issues and national trends) would also be key to developing an evidence base that would support requests for additional government or other funding.

f. In further discussion, it was suggested that given that 'out of area' costs were an issue across a wide number of councils, there could be scope for working more closely with a number of south west authorities (i.e. including and beyond the West of England region's geography/footprint) around exploring the co-development of a joint commissioning/brokerage approach to increase the supply of specialist children's and adult placements. Such an approach, if feasible, could potentially 'get ahead' of the



current market around this provision although it was noted that taking forward this work would also require properly resourced delivery capacity. It was suggested that this could be usefully flagged as an issue to be considered by the relevant policy committees under the committee governance system.

3. Recruitment and retention of staff

In terms of recruitment and retention of staff, it was noted that action was being taken to review the advertising of vacancies and to re-evaluate and implement revised salaries of certain key posts (subject to final confirmation), mindful of the market rate and competitive salaries offered by nearby authorities for similar jobs.

4. Home to School transport

There was a discussion around the need to reduce the escalation of costs associated with Home to School transport:

a. It was noted that the Home to School transport service remained under significant pressure from the increase in the proportion of children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) needing travel support, together with issues around limited local capacity and increasing supplier costs, and the costs of 'out of area' journeys.

b. In light of the need to secure savings and reduce costs, it was noted that a key decision report was being scheduled for the 5 March Cabinet proposing Home to School transport policy changes. These changes would look to support more independent travel for young people where this was appropriate. The aim of the policy changes was to deliver the required savings whilst also providing a service that was in the best interests of the children and young people concerned. It was noted that this would see a move towards provision that involved some shared journeys where appropriate rather than tailored individual journey packages.

5. Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) – legal challenges and mediation

There was a discussion around the Council's approach to legal challenges to decisions taken in relation to EHCPs:

a. It was clarified that, mindful of the Council's overall resource position, very careful legal due diligence was carried out in considering how to appropriately respond to legal challenges to the ECHP process. Where necessary, lawyers would be engaged for particular cases but, wherever possible, mediation was offered and used to try to resolve cases. Mediation could, for example, help to resolve communication issues in some cases.

b. The Deputy Mayor for Children's Services, Education and Equalities advised that the most effective way in the longer term to reduce the need for mediation and litigation in relation to EHCPs would be to invest in growing and sustaining Special Educational Needs provision across mainstream school settings so that the city's overall education provision was more inclusive.

6. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) budget proposals 2024/25

There was a discussion around the DSG budget proposals for 2024/25:



a. Members noted that in light of the ongoing seriousness of the DSG deficit (especially in relation to the High Needs Block), an updated DSG management plan was in place setting out detailed mitigations. In reviewing and updating the DSG management plan, great care had been taken to first assess the full impact of the unmitigated position in terms of the impact of the deficit. It was noted that a new team was now in place to oversee the delivery of the management plan and mitigations. Delivery of the plan required transformational culture change and could only succeed through a 'one council' approach and effective partnership work with the Department for Education and partners across the schools and education landscape.

b. Members agreed that under the committee management system, it would be critical to ensure ongoing focus on and close monitoring of the delivery of the DSG management plan/mitigations through the Children and Young People Committee and the Strategy and Resources Committee. In effect, this could be seen as the Council's fifth major transformation programme. The plan was considered to be robust by the Department for Education but delivery was a whole council issue. The investment underpinning the plan must deliver the required, improved outcomes.

c. A member drew attention to the following specific comment that was included within the Equality Impact Assessment of the 23 January Cabinet report on the 2024/25 DSG budget proposals:
'To note that in year 2024/2025, the position for the overall Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is a fair and consistent distribution of funding that is closely aligned to need and is essential to supporting opportunity for all children, irrespective of their background, ability and need.'

It was noted that officers would review this wording in terms of the report to be submitted to the budget Full Council meeting on 20 February, to indicate that this funding was aligned to need insofar as it was possible for the Council, at this time, to ensure this.

d. In response to a question, it was noted that the School Blocks funding formula was subject to final approval from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). It was noted that the allocated Schools Block funding was distributed by ESFA.

7. Maintained nursery school deficits

There was a discussion about the ongoing significant financial challenges that continued to be faced by maintained nursery schools, where 11 out of 12 were in deficit:

a. Whilst noting the context that the maintained nursery schools served deprived communities in the city, it was also noted that the outstanding deficits must be paid back.

b. It was noted that work was taking place through the Early Years service with nursery school leaders and governors to support the development of their deficit management plans, with the aim of trying to make this provision sustainable whilst also ensuring that deficits were steadily reduced and ultimately eliminated. The situation remained very challenging and it was noted that the Bristol Schools Forum had raised wider concerns about the need to secure increased long-term financial uplift in terms of resourcing early years provision.



2. ADULT AND COMMUNITIES DIRECTORATE - PROPOSED BUDGET

1. Public Health budget

Members noted the position in relation to the Public Health budget, noting that the Public Health grant was ring-fenced and operated on the principle of self-funding. Careful consideration was given to ensuring that the grant was operated strictly in line with government guidance and auditing requirements – for example, a proportion of the grant was able to be allocated to support delivery of health and wellbeing programmes linked to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and community health development work; the allocation of these funds was strictly in adherence with the relevant guidance.

2. Adult Social Care

Summary of main points raised/noted:

- a. It was noted that Adult Social Care continued to face significant demand and resource challenges in meeting care and support needs, with a provider sustainability issue from rising costs, significant inflationary pressures, and workforce pressures. As discussed earlier at the meeting, it was also noted, however, that encouraging progress had been made by the directorate in terms of forecasting service demand.
- b. As reported in detail at the 15 December meeting, it was noted that Adult Social Care was continuing to implement its service transformation programme, with the aim of improving service delivery and, in the longer term, creating a more sustainable financial position for the service.
- c. It was noted that the budget included a £3.665m growth figure for Adult Social Care – this had been allocated in the context of anticipated budget pressures. Whilst the associated risk of this not meeting the actual demand for services had been flagged through the directorate's risk register, it was not considered necessary at this point for the risk to be logged in the corporate risk register.
- d. It was noted that Adult Social Care would undergo an inspection at a future point through the new Care Quality Commission inspection framework.
- e. It was noted that through the Adult Social Care transformation programme, there was increased confidence around improved performance in achieving savings in comparison with previous years. Whilst pressures remained (including workforce challenges), a trajectory of improvement was in place in terms of bringing spend closer to national benchmarks in terms of unit costs. Workstreams were being taken forward to ensure that the right and appropriate level of provision was provided for people with care needs in the right place, preferably in home/community settings where possible. In relation to complex care cases, additional capacity was now in place (including the use of trusted assessors through the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector) to assist hospital discharge. Individual care needs were also reviewed at a suitable point following hospital discharge to specifically avoid ongoing 'over prescription' of care support (and related costs); whilst short term intensive support might be required at first, this could often be reduced after a suitable period. It was noted that bringing better systems into place helped the service to deal more effectively with demand.



3. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair thanked members and officers for their attendance over both parts of this meeting.

It was noted that following the meeting, a report setting out comments from the Resources Scrutiny Commission would be drafted (the draft minutes would be appended to the report) and circulated to all Commission members for comment. Once finalised, the report would be published for inclusion with the agenda papers to be considered at the Full Council budget meeting on 20 February.

As agreed earlier at the meeting, an additional meeting of the Finance Task Group would be arranged for early-mid March. The purpose of this meeting would be to draw up comments on/flag financial processes/issues that it was suggested should be the subject of early consideration by the new policy committees to be established under the Council's committee governance system.

On behalf of the Commission, the Chair thanked Cllr Cheney, Deputy Mayor for City Economy, Finance and Performance and Denise Murray, Director: Finance for their help in assisting the work of the Finance Task Group and for the openness and transparency of information that had been provided throughout the Group's work and discussions.

On behalf of the Commission, the Chair also thanked Denise Murray for all her work and wider contribution to the Council and city, noting that she would be leaving the employment of the Council at the end of March.

Members also thanked Cllr Gollop for his work in chairing the Resources Scrutiny Commission and Finance Task Group.

The meeting closed at 6.33 p.m.

CHAIR _____

