

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Resources Scrutiny Commission

31 January 2023 at 4.45 pm



Members present:

Resources Scrutiny Commission:

CLlr Geoff Gollop (Chair), CLlr Heather Mack, CLlr Mark Bradshaw, CLlr Martin Fodor, CLlr Zoe Goodman, CLlr John Goulandris

People Scrutiny Commission: CLlr Tim Kent, CLlr Christine Townsend, CLlr Kerry Bailes, CLlr Brenda Massey, CLlr Lisa Stone, CLlr Tim Wye

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board: CLlr Tony Dyer, CLlr David Wilcox

Cabinet members:

CLlr Craig Cheney, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for City Economy, Finance and Performance
CLlr Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Equalities
CLlr Helen Holland, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Integrated Care System
CLlr Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities

Officers in attendance:

Stephen Peacock, Chief Executive
Denise Murray, Director: Finance
Steph Griffin, Director: Workforce and Change
Tim Borrett, Director: Policy, Strategy and Digital
Tim O'Gara, Director: Legal and Democratic Services
Abi Gbago, Executive Director: Children and Education
Richard Hanks, Acting Director: Education and Skills
Hugh Evans, Executive Director: Adult and Communities
Stephen Beet, Acting Director: Adult Social Care
Johanna Holmes, Scrutiny Co-ordinator

16 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting and drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.



17 Apologies for Absence

It was noted that apologies had been received from Cllrs Gary Hopkins, Mohamed Makawi, Tim Rippington, Sharon Scott and Mark Weston.

18 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

19 Chair's Business

None.

20 Public Forum

Questions

It was noted that the following two questions had been submitted by Tom Merchant, Unison:

Q1. Deletion of vacant roles in teams by senior managers added to the recruitment freeze has put staff under pressure in several teams but particularly in customer-facing roles like libraries. This seems to be a fait accompli before the council has actually made a decision on cuts, does the committee think that this should be relaxed until staff consultation has been completed some time after this full council budget meeting?

Q2. At Cabinet yesterday, Cllr Asher Craig mentioned about in-house services (which I thanked her for). With the extra workstreams in the recommendations: children's homes; learning disability and autism; and cultural outreach programmes is the committee worried we are wasting in-house talent making council staff redundant when they could be utilised on these projects rather than outside providers?

The Chair commented that in the context of the budget process, it was not appropriate for the Resources Scrutiny Commission to express a direct opinion on these matters.

Points raised/noted:

1. Cllr Fodor commented that there may be an issue if the freezing of recruitment to posts led to increased workload/pressure on other members of staff.

2. Cllr Cheney advised that the recruitment freeze had been introduced in response to the in-year budget pressures. He stressed that any service redesigns/restructures would be developed taking full account of service needs.



3. The Director: Workforce and Change clarified that a total recruitment freeze had not been in place; a 'dispensation' process had accompanied the freeze whereby certain posts had been recruited to subject to the scrutiny/approval of senior management - for example, any recruitment in relation to the Growth and Regeneration directorate had been subject to approval by the Executive Director.

4. In relation to question 2, the Director: Workforce and Change advised that Human Resources would be supporting directorates in relation to service redesigns, and as part of this every opportunity would be explored to redeploy any displaced members of staff; the importance of seeking to retain experienced and committed individuals was recognised.

5. It was noted that a written reply would also be sent to Unison in relation to these questions.

(Action: via the Scrutiny team, a written response to be sent to Unison)

Statements

It was that the following statements had been submitted:

1. Cllr Carla Denyer - topic: carbon impact assessments.
2. David Redgewell, Robbie Bentley, Gordon Richardson and Brendon Taylor - topic: comments on the proposed budget including the transport levy.

David Redgewell briefly outlined this statement - it was noted/agreed that as this statement related to the Growth and Regeneration elements of the budget, it would be appropriate for the statement to be presented at Part 2 of the meeting on 2 February, when members of the Growth and Regeneration Scrutiny Commission would be present.

21 Scrutiny of 2023/24 Budget Proposals (part 1)

It was noted that the Finance Task Group had identified a number of issues/questions/areas of focus in advance of these budget scrutiny sessions. Part 1 of the meeting was accordingly structured around these areas of focus.

PEOPLE (Children and Education & Adult and Communities directorates):

1. Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)

In advance of the meeting, members had identified a key concern about the impact of very substantial pressures and significant challenges in the Early Years and High Needs blocks and how these could be sustainably resolved. The extent to which reserves were being used was a serious issue and an area of high ongoing risk for the Council. It was essential to address how a sustainable annual position could be achieved as quickly as possible

Points raised/noted:



1. Cllr Craig commented as follows:

- a. Notwithstanding the particular circumstances in Bristol, the challenge faced around DSG deficit was a national issue with serious implications for a significant number of local authorities.
- b. It was acknowledged that there had been a 7% increase for 2023/24 from government in terms of the annual DSG funding increase.
- c. In terms of the high needs block deficit, the statutory override permitted by the government allowed borrowing from other council budgets to cover the deficit, but it was fully recognised that a long-term plan was needed to achieve a sustainable solution. The statutory override effectively gave the Council a maximum of 3 years to achieve a solution and reduce the deficit.
- d. A DSG management plan was being developed, with the engagement of the Bristol Schools Forum, including a range of mitigations. This sat alongside the Delivering Better Value programme which would identify opportunities to improve outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Scrutiny would be kept informed of and consulted on the management plan (**Action: to be picked up in the context of the People / Resources scrutiny work programmes**)
- e. It was recognised that a holistic approach was also required to significantly improve inclusive practices in school/academy settings, learning from all available best practice. This was particularly important in terms of improving early interventions, recognising the context of continuing, increased demand for Education, Health and Care Plans.

2. In response to a question about whether there had been sufficient strategic focus on the DSG issue over the last decade, Cllr Craig commented that, in her view, it would have been preferable if better planning and collective action had taken place collaboratively across the 4 West of England unitary authorities 5-10 years ago.

3. In response to further questions, Cllr Craig stated that given the scale of this issue nationally, it was her view that the government needed to provide further financial assistance to authorities; the Council must also take all possible action to reduce the scale/trajectory of the deficit.

4. The Director: Finance commented that implementing the Delivering Better Value programme will be an important step in demonstrating that progress is being made; however, it was also clear that the Council was currently some way off from determining a fully sustainable plan. The Council must own the position as it is and pursue all possible mitigations and actions.

5. Given that this was a national issue, it was noted that a collective voice to government across the Council (and other authorities) will be important in relation to potentially securing additional financial assistance.

6. In noting the above, the Chair suggested that the budget report to the Full Council budget meeting should include additional narrative to highlight more fully the seriousness of the position in relation to the DSG deficit alongside reference to the action being taken/planned and mitigation measures. It was agreed that this would be actioned (**Action: appropriate additional narrative to be included in the Full Council budget report**)



7. In response to a point raised by the Chair, it was noted that the issue of the DSG deficit would continue to be highlighted in the authority's Annual Governance Statement.

8. Cllr Kent stressed the key importance of improving inclusion across mainstream school/academy provision; it was also important for the Council to provide as much specialist support and advice as possible to assist schools in achieving this.

9. Cllr Townsend welcomed the commitment of the Mayor/administration to create 450 new, specialist provision places. She stressed, however, the importance of securing effective focus on early intervention for 2/3/4 year olds. Cllr Townsend also expressed deep concern about the continuing issue (reflected for example, through the numbers of children on roll eligible for free school meals) of schools (especially secondary schools) whose cohort of children on roll were not sufficiently reflective of the characteristics of their local communities. In her view, the Council needed to set a clear vision/expectations of schools in this regard and exercise all possible levers in taking this forward.

In response to this point, the Executive Director: Children and Education commented that she was holding discussions with the Department for Education around levers available to the Council in relation to schools/academies.

10. In relation to a point raised by Cllr Townsend, the Interim Director: Education and Skills agreed to check the accuracy of the DSG equalities impact assessment which currently indicated there was not a disproportionate impact under the 'sex' protected characteristic (given that special educational needs remain more prevalent in boys than girls); also, the EQIA should take account of the carers of early years children with SEND (**Action: these points to be checked in relation to the EQIA**)

2. General issue - Service provision/quality of Children's Services and Adult Social Care:

In advance of the meeting, members had identified the following areas of focus:

a. Savings

- Very significant savings are proposed at a time of increased demand for some services.
- Can these savings / efficiencies realistically be delivered without impacting on service quality and effectiveness?
- Specific detail is required on how these savings will be delivered.

b. High-cost individual care packages: Some individual care packages continue to be very high cost (some incurring costs of £10 - 15k per individual per week through expensive, outsourced private sector provision).

- What more can be done, e.g. through 'spend to save' initiatives to deliver increased, locally based solutions and to reduce the high costs of 'out of area' placements/provision?
- Given the scale of the savings, will there be staff capacity available to develop future 'spend to save' options?
- How can improved local options be developed in collaboration with neighbouring authorities and health partners?



Points raised/noted:

1. Cllr Wye raised the issue of addressing any potential impacts of reduced staffing in relation to adult social care. In response, Cllr Holland commented as follows:
 - a. It was understandable that there were concerns about the impact of adult social care savings.
 - b. It was important to review staffing structures across adult social care to ensure they were 'fit for purpose' – as service redesign was taken forward, some staff roles may need to change as part of moving to a better service. It was important to bear in mind that in relation to adult social care, Bristol was a high spender but not necessarily a high performer across all service areas. It was essential to continue the drive to use resources as effectively as possible.
 - c. A key part of the approach was to provide services which would help people to live as independently as possible at home – apart from helping to improve the quality of individuals' lives, this had the added benefit of reducing costs when compared with the cost of care settings.

2. The Acting Director: Adult Social Care drew attention to the mitigations identified in the EQIA. He added that some savings would be delivered through rationalising more senior management posts. In relation to some practitioner posts, new and different ways of working would help achieve savings; there would also be an emphasis on ensuring that teams operated at safe and manageable levels. The ongoing national issues around recruitment were also recognised and would be factored into the approach being taken.

3. In response to questions from Cllr Mack about the feasibility of delivering savings across children's services, including foster care, without diminishing services, the Executive Director: Children and Education stressed that a service transformation programme was being developed and would be taken forward as soon as possible; this would include examining and addressing wider issues around workforce recruitment and retention. Full account would also be taken in the plans of any recommendations for improvement arising from the current Ofsted Inspection of Bristol's Children's Services.

4. It was noted that there was a wider corporate issue to be addressed and managed through with the Integrated Care Board and other partners in terms of reviewing tripartite arrangements, particularly in terms of ensuring a more equitable sharing of costs in relation to high cost placements.

5. In response to a point raised by Cllr Dyer around the issues of recruiting care staff, Cllr Holland acknowledged the importance of attracting younger adults to work in care related services, and working e.g. with the universities to increase awareness of access to care career starting points/pathways and progression opportunities; it was also important to encourage apprenticeships where possible.

6. It was noted that resources were potentially not always being used to best effect across organisations in cases where individuals moved jobs between providers and then undertook training which was in many ways similar to that provided through their previous employment; Cllr Holland suggested it would be beneficial from all perspectives to look to introduce a relevant accreditation/'kite' mark that was recognised across the sector - there were also best practice examples to learn from, e.g. a Somali led care provider which had reached into an inner city community to help recruit a diverse workforce. Cllr Craig drew attention to the valuable insight and opportunities being taken forward through the Bristol Race



Equality Strategic Leaders' Group in improving the diversity of employees recruited to work in the public sector.

7. In response to questions from the Chair, Cllr Holland and the Executive Director: Adult and Communities outlined details of the improved arrangements in place to actively monitor adult social care provision and related budgets. This included covering a senior management panel to ensure additional rigour for high cost placements. There was confidence that better monitoring systems were now in place with improved locality knowledge/insight and increased internal rigour and scrutiny of expenditure; all of this helped the service in responding better and more quickly to emerging issues and pressures. Work was ongoing also with providers to develop the Bristol market as this would reduce more costly 'out of area' placements.

8. It was noted that important lessons were being learnt through the Better Lives at Home programme, involving close liaison between Adult Social Care and the Housing Delivery team to help enable people to live independently whilst also reducing overall costs. The Addison Apartments development in Sea Mills was an example of the best practice provision that could be achieved.

9. In discussion, members commented that 'spend to save' options must be further explored, for example around developing extra care housing to help enable more independent lives and help reduce out of area placements.

10. It was noted that on request, scrutiny members could be given the opportunity to view the Liquidlogic IT monitoring system.

C. RESOURCES DIRECTORATE:

In advance of the meeting, members had identified the following areas of focus:

1. Savings in Legal and Democratic Services (£900k), Finance restructure (£998k), IT service (£450k):

- Can these savings/efficiencies realistically be delivered without impacting on service quality and effectiveness? Further detail is required on the impact on service levels.
- Cutting budgets in some areas appears short-sighted e.g. savings in the Mayor's/Executive office means money is being taken out of the budget but in the knowledge that the new committee governance model will require funding from May 2024. The year 2024/25 saving is therefore unlikely to be realised as funds will likely be redeployed.

Points raised/noted:

1. **IT savings:** In response to questions from Cllr Wilcox about proposed IT savings, Cllr Cheney advised that in implementing these savings, every effort would be made to mitigate any impact on service delivery. The Director: Policy, Strategy and Digital outlined further detail of the proposed IT savings which would involve reviewing all current spending on IT software and services across the council and seeking to reduce or cancel any non-essential contracts and services. An IT staff restructure would take place - at this point, staff consultation had not started but further detail could be provided in due course. In terms



of service impacts that may be necessary, this was likely to see greater emphasis on meeting purely statutory obligations and there may, for example be a need to slightly trim operational service hours (e.g. from 10 operational hours per day to 9). A digital strategic partner would also be contracted to carry out specific work, with accompanying rigorous contract/cost management.

2. Mayor's/Executive office 2024/25 saving: Cllrs Mack and Fodor reiterated previous concerns expressed about this saving – in their view, money was being taken out of the budget but in the knowledge that the new committee governance model would require funding from May 2024. In response, Cllr Cheney commented that at this point, there was no clear view emerging through the Committee Model Working Group about the detail of the likely future committee model; therefore, there could also be no clarity about what costs would be involved or the budget required. Cllr Cheney suggested that as the saving related to 2024/25, this would be a key consideration for the cross-party 2024/25 budget planning group that the Mayor intended to establish. Cllr Fodor suggested that it should be possible to benchmark and judge potential anticipated costs from core cities already operating without a Mayoral model.

2. Savings in Local crisis prevention fund (£350k) and Debt collection outreach (£100k):

- Further detail is required to enable members to assess these proposals, especially in terms of the risk of additional pressures caused to other services.

In discussion, Cllr Cheney advised that it should be possible to top-up these budgets as 2023/24 progressed through the Household Support Fund. It was agreed that this point should be clarified in the Full Council budget report (**Action: appropriate additional narrative to be included in the Full Council budget report**)

3. Reserves: Members had previously commented that reserves were under pressure, not just in relation to DSG, amid current and future financial uncertainty – a much more comprehensive explanation was needed generally on the rationale guiding the use/allocation of reserves.

Other issues raised:

1. Bristol Waste Business Plan

The Chair raised a concern that the Council budget would be approved at a point when the detail of Bristol Waste's Business Plan would not have been available for OSMB scrutiny, which seemed to constitute an unnecessary risk, given that the national economic situation may be impacting/placing pressure on their costs and services. His preference was that the company plans should have been approved in advance of the Budget Council meeting.

In response, Cllr Cheney advised that the Shareholder Group (attended by the OSMB Chair in an observer capacity) would be reviewing the draft Bristol Waste Business Plan on 6 February. The Director: Finance advised that the Council's budget reflected the Council's financial commitment to the companies and associated reserves and established the capital and revenue cash limits considered sufficient to meet the business needs. The companies would operate within these funding parameters for 2023/24 and business



plans would be developed within these thresholds. Further detail was included at Appendix 9 of the budget report: Long Term Investments & Shareholdings. The Director: Finance reminded members that the External Auditor had advised previously that due to the complexity of the Council budget papers and the Company business plans, they should not all be considered on the same Cabinet agenda (i.e. in January, ahead of the Budget Council meeting).

2. New parking charges for small district car parks

Although noting that the Growth and Regeneration budget proposals would be scrutinised in detail on 2 February, Cllr Massey drew attention to the fact that the introduction of car park charges in Westbury-on-Trym would impact on residents from Southmead and Horfield who used that car park to access the GP surgery and local bank; the impact of these proposals on communities must be considered.

22 Meeting adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7.22 pm (to reconvene at 4.00 pm on 2 February 2023)

CHAIR _____

