

## **BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET**

### **MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING**

Tuesday, 23rd January, 2024

Present:- **Councillors** Robin Moss, Lucy Hodge, Ian Halsall, Oli Henman, Hal MacFie, Onkar Saini, Toby Simon, Malcolm Treby and Colin Blackburn

Apologies for absence: Councillors:

#### **47 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

#### **48 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

#### **49 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

There were none

#### **50 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Lucy Hodge stated that, as Cabinet Lead for Highways, she had been involved in conversations about the budget and so for transparency purposes, would not take part in the debate on that item.

Councillor Oli Henman stated that, as Cabinet Lead for Climate Emergency and Sustainable Travel, he had been involved in conversations about the budget and so for transparency purposes, would not take part in the debate on that item.

#### **51 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN**

There was none.

#### **52 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING**

Councillor Shaun Hughes made a statement regarding emissions based parking charges in Midsomer Norton. A copy of the statement is appended to these minutes.

Following a question from Councillor Blackburn regarding WECA funding, Councillor Hughes explained that this had been limited investment for a redevelopment of the town square and town hall.

Councillor Halsall asked if there was evidence of people parking for more than 2 hours. Councillor Hughes explained that there has been no feasibility study, there is little evidence and the impact has not been assessed.

Councillor Moss raised the issue of collecting money – he asked how often parking enforcement officers were in the area. Councillor Hughes stated that it was on average every 3/6 months.

Becky Brooks (Director 3SG – Supporting Charities & Social Enterprises in BANES) made a statement on the budget proposals.

In response to a question from Councillor Henman, Becky Brooks explained that she has asked for a breakdown in terms of groups effected by the proposed cuts and will wait to see the detail.

Councillor Blackburn as if 3G had been asked for any input on the proposals. Becky Brooks explained that they had not been contacted.

Councillor Moss stated that the work that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector does is valued. Becky Brooks stated that she would welcome an opportunity to get around the table to discuss the proposals. A huge amount of anxiety is being felt.

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The Chair explained that a question and answer document had been circulated to Panel members and will be attached to these minutes. Questions had been received from:

Councillor Eleanor Jackson

Becky Brooks (Director 3SG) regarding budget proposals

## **53 MINUTES**

The Chair explained that minutes for both the 16<sup>th</sup> January 2024 and this meeting would come to the March meeting of the Panel for approval.

## **54 BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2024/25 AND FINANCIAL OUTLOOK**

The Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Mark Elliott, introduced the item (officer support Andy Rothery, Executive Director - Resources). Councillor Elliott explained that it had been a very difficult budget setting round, the cost of living crisis equally effects the Council with the added demand in social services. He added that, despite this, he is pleased to present a robust and balanced budget proposal. He stated that he had heard representations from the third sector and would be considering what could be done. The Executive Director explained that this was the most difficult budget he had worked on.

The Chair invited Councillor Dine Romero, Chair of the Childrens, Adults, Health and Wellbeing PDS Panel, to make a comment on the budget proposals on behalf of her

Panel. Councillor Romero first highlighted that the word 'overspend' was used regarding Children's Services for example but a better phrase would be 'increase in demand'. She explained that the Panel had picked up on a lack of detail in the budget proposals. She stated that there are concerns on the budget proposals but everybody understands the position. She stated that there was a lack of clarity on when the cuts would come in to play which was leading to more anxiety in the sector. She urged the Cabinet Member to reconsider the cuts put forward and at least work with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sector to explore timescales as they are often providing preventative services.

The Chair invited Councillor Andy Wait, Chair of the Climate Emergency and Sustainability PDS Panel, to make a comment on the budget proposals on behalf of his Panel. Councillor Wait stated that he sympathized with the Cabinet Member's position which was caused by unfair treatment from central government who did not seem to appreciate the services of local authorities. Regarding the Climate Emergency area – he stated that there was now a small team in place and the Panel considered policies that are driven by the Climate Emergency such as Liveable Neighbourhoods and the Clean Air Zone. He stated that the issue of parking charges in Midsomer Norton came up at the Panel meeting. He added that difficult decisions have to be made. He congratulated Councillor Sarah Warren and the Climate Emergency team on their achievements so far.

The Chair, Councillor Robin Moss explained that he would be making statements at Cabinet and Council reflecting general comments of PDS Panels.

Panel members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Halsall asked for confirmation that Council would formalise the budget on 20<sup>th</sup> February and that the Council is not in a section 114 situation. The Cabinet Member confirmed this.

Councillor Halsall referred to the change of format regarding Council Tax relief which people can be signposted to. The Cabinet Member stated that he was pleased to have passed this adjustment which will help those most vulnerable.

Councillor Halsall asked if the Cabinet Member would sit down and have a discussion with the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector. The Cabinet Member confirmed that he would do that, he stated that he wanted to engage the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sector and work with them not 'do to' them and use a scalpel and not a machete. He stated that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector do extremely important work and save the Council money downstream. He apologized that the budget proposals came late on and as a shock to them, he explained that savings had to be found at a late stage. He will work with them.

Councillor MacFie asked if the income and savings target of £16.82m would mean lost services. The Cabinet Member stated that he had confidence in the budget, it had been through strong internal challenge and was a robust budget with a risk reserve.

Regarding a question from Councillor MacFie on business rates retention, the Executive Director explained that there was a business rates review in the future so there is no exact figure on this at the moment.

Councillor Romero stated that she welcomed the Cabinet Member's words around the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector and asked for more clarification around timings. The Cabinet Member stated that he heard what had been said. Around timings – he explained that each contract had different end times and it would depend on each contract. He stated that he could guarantee a reasonable approach and no cliff edge.

Councillor Sani asked if relationships with the voluntary sector would be maintained and strengthened with adult services being brought in house. The Cabinet Member confirmed that details would be worked out with the relevant Cabinet Members.

Councillor Sani asked about inflationary pressure. The Executive Director explained the need to be prudent and the fact that it was unlikely costs would come down.

Councillor Sani asked if there is a possibility of additional revenue generation in future years. The Cabinet Member stated that there is now a more entrepreneurial approach and current investment in schemes such as Bath Quays and the Fashion Museum which would be future income streams.

Councillor Blackburn stated that he appreciated the work being done but asked about the way it had been done in that, 5 years into the administration, the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector had not been engaged with. The Cabinet Member explained that the savings plan came late and he would not have wanted things to happen like that but it was a process issue. He added that contracts would be coming back in house which had been outsourced for 10 years and Cabinet Members would want to engage.

Councillor Blackburn stated that he understood Councillor Romero's point regarding wording 'overpend' when it is 'pressure' – he asked about plans to mitigate the uplift in need. Councillor Romero explained that costs had risen (for example in agency staff) as well as the increase in those needing provision. She explained that for some, investment in preventative services would be useful – an example would be that more local SEN (Special Educational Needs) provision would impact on the current spend on transport (to provision outside of the area).

Councillor Blackburn stated that the authority benefits from income regarding Heritage and Parking. He added that the Commercial Estate was the golden egg. He asked about the impacts of parking charges. The Cabinet Member explained that he understood that parking charges cannot keep going up. He explained that the Commercial Estate was functioning better than in the past – around 7% and the Roman Baths were taking more money per visitor now.

Councillor Treby asked about the 3G proposed cuts and impact on the budget. The Cabinet Member stated that there was a need to engage with them so as not to have an impact further down the line on statutory services. We will look at value for money with each contract.

Councillor Treby asked if the borrowing position per resident was favourable and how the budget affects this position. The Executive Director explained that this moves up and down and has been below the limit through the budget process.

Councillor Hodge asked how the home to school transport provision compared to other authorities, the Cabinet Member explained that the area is escalating as it is for many Councils. All packages are being reviewed internally and provision for each child is being assessed. This is a national market failure – help from Government is needed.

In response to a question from Councillor Simon on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), confirmation was given that the overspend linked to the High Needs Block did not place a risk on the general fund as the DSG does not cover the statutory responsibilities the council has towards parents. We do not believe the Government would remove the statutory override.

Councillor Simon asked if there was a robust estimate regarding homelessness and hotels. The Cabinet Member explained that costs had risen dramatically and there is a move to bring some properties back in use for homelessness provision.

Councillor Moss identified some themes – we are in this position due to decisions in Central Government; the Dilnot Report identified that the Adult Support system was broken 13 years ago and there is a lack of detail in Child and Adult social care budget proposals. Regarding home to school transport – not sure the LGA (Local Government Association) work is picked up locally. Regrading the Commercial Estate - improving performance is welcomed, the Panel wish to further scrutinize this area - in the past, information had been opaque and other members excluded. Panel members agreed to include this on the forward plan for further scrutiny. Breakdown of commercial estate income from corporate estate returns was required for auditing purposes.

Councillor Moss stated that it would be useful for the Panel to see more information on the usage of agency staff and consultants by the authority. The Cabinet Member confirmed that consultancy would only be used when there was insufficient expertise/resource internally.

In response to a question from Councillor Moss, reassurance was given that discussions were taking place about any housing revenue requirements on the council in consideration of statutory thresholds.

Councillor Moss stated that there was a potential consequence to footfall for local business if parking charges are brought in for Midsomer Norton and he suggested that the Cabinet row back from this proposal.

Councillor Moss asked if there was any detail regarding a parish and town Council precept. The Executive Director reported that there is no information on this yet and it would be reported to Council.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to pass the following comments on to the Cabinet and Council for their consideration of the budget:

- I. The panel recognised the challenging financial circumstances faced by the council and thank officers for their work in developing a draft balanced budget;
- II. To request that Cabinet fully examines the potential downstream effects in response to its third sector budget proposals;
- III. To request that home to school transport arrangements are subject to review to explore potential savings;
- IV. To agree to add scrutiny of the commercial estate to the panel’s workplan
- V. To ask cabinet to fully examine the impact of the parking income proposals for Radstock and Midsomer Norton and to report next steps to the Climate Emergency and Sustainability Panel

## **55 PANEL WORKPLAN**

The Panel noted the future workplan with the following additional items:

Commercial Estate

Aequus (consultants and tendering process)

The meeting ended at 5.50 pm

Chair(person) .....

Date Confirmed and Signed .....

**Prepared by Democratic Services**