

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Tuesday, 28th January, 2025

Present:- **Councillors** Hal MacFie, Toby Simon, Malcolm Treby, Colin Blackburn, George Tomlin and Duncan Hounsell

Apologies for absence: Councillors: Robin Moss and Ian Halsall

124 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

125 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

126 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Robin Moss gave his apologies. Councillor Treby (Vice Chair) chaired the meeting.

Councillor Ian Halsall gave his apologies.

127 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

128 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

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

David Redgewell (Transport South West) made a statement regarding the Transport levy which has been frozen for 5 years. He stated that the cost of running buses has risen and the Mayor has asked that the levy be raised. He urged that the levy be in place by Friday otherwise less bus services from September.

The Executive Director explained that a request has been received from WECA, the budget will be published shortly.

130 MINUTES

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chair.

131 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

The update is contained in the Budget item.

132 BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2025/26 AND FINANCIAL OUTLOOK

The Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Mark Elliott introduced the report. He explained that the underlying theme was uncertainty and that the final figures would be available in early February. He stated that a cautious and carefully balanced budget would be presented.

The Chair of the Children, Adults, Health and Wellbeing PDS Panel gave feedback from her Panel. Councillor Romero stated that there was a lack of information due to the growing lateness of information from Government (for example funding of the safety valve) which made the budget proposals difficult to scrutinise. She stated that there were concerns about there being similar proposals to last year. She pointed to the huge amount of work in non-statutory services and work on early support.

The Chair of the Climate Emergency and Sustainability PDS Panel gave feedback from his Panel. Councillor Wait stated that most things within the remit of the Panel are non-statutory activities so difficult to scrutinise. He agreed that there had been a lack of information in that no Capital Budget information was available. He stated that he was pleased to see funding for 3 school streets in the budget. He asked that more information be supplied in future years.

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

Councillor MacFie asked if the costs regarding Children's Services are being investigated. The Cabinet Member stated that the plan is to bring more back in house and address the home to school transport issue as we are currently at the whim of the external market. He stated that things that were dismantled a long time ago are being rebuilt. Regarding home to school transport he stated that there is some work we can do around single taxi journeys. The Executive Director added that there is an action plan regarding home to school transport and that there are several drivers to the current pressures in the budget area such as more children in residential care. She stated that the focus was on what is best for young people. She stated that work is being done with health colleagues regarding children with education and health needs.

Councillor Blackburn stated that the Panel had consistently asked for data to show the context of the budget proposals to include information from the previous year and trajectory. He stated that we can look at a 5 year projection but not look back. He stated that he totally took on board the pressures but asked for more data. The Cabinet Member stated that he would be happy to work with the Panel to produce the detail they want. He stated that Annex 1 shows the last year and this year for each portfolio. He stated that there is no attempt to hide information.

Councillor Simon stated that these are more transparent budget papers than in previous years and in other authorities. He stated that it can be difficult to balance the bigger picture with too much detail. He stated that he felt there were robust

proposals and that it would be helpful to have line by line risk analysis in severity order. Some risks (such as contract inflation are only moderately stated). He asked if there is provision for National Insurance increases in the care sector. The Executive Director explained that there is a lot of dialogue with the sector and that there is an annual grant from Government to allow us to give an uplift. There is pressure and discussions are ongoing.

Councillor Treby asked if the 3% increase on last years budget for Adult Services was achievable. The Cabinet Member stated that officers had signed off on this figure and we know there may be pressures. The level of uncertainty is higher than usual. We have a good record on achieving savings plans but predicting cost increases is more difficult.

Councillor Treby asked if the money generated by Heritage Services is a sufficient contingency. The Cabinet Member for Economic and Cultural Sustainable Development, Councillor Roper, explained that the Roman Baths is the key driver. There are other activities going on such as the shop, guided tours etc. and visitors will be charged more. There is a multiple pronged approach to revenue. The Cabinet Member for Resources, Councillor Elliott stated that there is contingency provision against high risk areas.

Councillor Treby asked how much Capital is flowing into next year and what level of borrowing there is for the Capital Programme. The Cabinet Member explained that Capital underspend is not a good thing, he is comfortable that it is not hitting the revenue budget. The officer added that Quarter 3 should be factored in and these figures are not in the report, there will be more details in the report to Cabinet in February. The Cabinet Member added that a lot of Capital schemes are grant funded not funded by borrowing.

Councillor Simon asked if the borrowing regarding the Capital Schools Grant overspend has a revenue cost and what is the additional borrowing cost. The officer stated that the deficit falls on the Council, we would have £33m more if the Government had funded this. The Cabinet Member added that there is a delay in the Government funding regarding Culverhay.

Councillor Simon asked about the 4 maintained schools that are left and if we should be encouraging them to join an academy. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor May, explained that SEND and DSG funding is a national issue. He explained that 94% of schools in the authority are in academies. Decisions are made by the Department for Education. We need to develop new ways to communicate with schools such as the School Funding Board. He agreed that the Council cannot provide the same level of back office (for example Human Resources) support to schools with such a small number.

Councillor Hounsell asked about the estimate of 4% (then 3% thereafter) of pay inflation. The Cabinet Member stated that we are as confident in that figure as we can be and have been through the due diligence. The Chief Executive added that inflation has spiked and feels more stable now so there is an expectation that the pressure will reduce.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members and asked them to note the comments of the Panel.

133 NEW LIBRARY SYSTEM ROLL OUT - UPDATE

The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Tim Ball, introduced the report.

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

Councillor Simon explained that he had asked for the report. He pointed to the suggestion in the report that we might disengage from Libraries West which he believes should be ruled out. He stated that this was an attempt to learn to run a multi authority procurement system for IT and this one has not worked. He stated that as a regular user, he has not noticed any improvements since the early days. Pages are still taking 20 seconds to load, there is not enough computer power. He thanked the Cabinet Member and officer for the information regarding correspondence with Axiell. He had hoped the Panel would have access to all KPIs and monitoring figures to see if the contract addressed all important issues. He stated that there are lessons to be learned regarding major IT procurement. The officer stated that he agreed. He explained that Somerset are leading on this and all are speaking from the same hymn sheet. He stated that Axiell had provided full 10% backdated. There will be a 'lessons learned' piece of work coming in the following months. It has been difficult. The Libraries West Board meets weekly, there is a lot to discuss.

Councillor Blackburn stated that this organization has been doing this for years so it will be interesting to see the 'lessons learned' information. He stated that 10% and no apology was shocking considering the poor performance. He stated that he hoped Somerset will do their job. The officer stated that it was challenging to work with multiple authorities.

Councillor Hounsell stated that there was no question of withdrawing from Libraries West and no criticism of support BANES officers have given – this is about a procurement contract.

Councillor Simon stated that when the 'lessons learned' review is done, this could be a future item for the Panel to consider, maybe in connection with other authorities. He asked the officer to pass on the flavour of the Panel discussion on to colleagues at Somerset.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officer.

134 PANEL WORKPLAN

Panel members noted the future plan.

The meeting ended at 5.08 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services