

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

WEDNESDAY 14 DECEMBER 2022

PRESENT: Councillors Gerry Clark (Chairman), John Story (Vice-Chairman), Simon Bond, Gary Muir, Neil Knowles, Helen Price, Julian Sharpe, Shamsul Shelim and Chris Targowski

Also in attendance: Councillors Andrew Johnson, Samantha Rayner, David Hilton, David Coppinger, Gurpreet Bhangra, Phil Haseler, Amy Tisi, Mandy Brar, David Cannon and Donna Stimson

Officers: Mark Beeley, Kirsty Hunt, Tony Reeves, Emma Duncan, Andrew Durrant, Kevin McDaniel, Adele Taylor, Andrew Vallance, David Birch, Elaine Browne, Lin Ferguson, Louise Freeth, Tracy Hendren, Chris Joyce, Lynne Lidster, Rebecca Hatch, Alysse Strachan and Adrien Waite

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L Jones, Councillor G Jones and Councillor Walters. Councillor Knowles, Councillor Targowski and Councillor Muir were attending the meeting as substitutes.

Councillor Davies and Councillor Werner were attending the meeting virtually, they were therefore unable to vote on any potential recommendations that the Panel would put forward.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

Minutes

Councillor Price requested a minor amendment, that it had been stated in the minutes that the residents would have to pay for services provided at the library. This was incorrect and should say that the library had been charging volunteers, who were providing their services to residents at the library.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 17th November 2022 were approved as a true and accurate record.

Draft Budget 2023/24 - Scrutiny Challenge Session

The Chairman introduced the budget paper and explained that all Members had been given the opportunity to submit questions to officers which would be answered. These questions had been answered and circulated to Panel Members ahead of the meeting, with the Panel meeting an opportunity for Panel Members to raise further and additional questions. The Chairman underlined that only Panel Members would be able to ask questions at the meeting.

Adele Taylor, Executive Director of Resources, gave a presentation which showed the approach for managing the council's resources. It was a challenging financial situation, with high inflation, interest rates and demographic growth impacting both the council and its residents. This had an impact on both revenue and capital costs. In year, there had been budget pressures identified from month 2 onwards, with a peak of £2.5 million overspend but this had been reduced by month 6. Assumptions at the start of the budget setting process had

been for a 2% council tax increase, no adult social care precept, a 1% increase in pension contributions, reductions in some government grants and a 2% salary increase. However, since the Medium Term Financial Plan had been agreed, there had been some changes to assumptions. Council tax had increased by 3% and adults social care by 2%, which was worth around £830,000 for every 1% increase. Interest rate and inflation assumptions had been updated, while the pensions primary rate was increased by 1.5% but the deficit was reduced to keep to an overall of a 1% increase. There had been some reductions in government grants but the council was waiting for policy documents and the finance settlement to come through from the government which would provide further information.

Considering the approach to the budget, Adele Taylor explained that services had been asked to model growth, savings and invest to save initially. Services were also asked to model cash limited budgets except for two corporate issues, new obligations under the national transfer scheme and the cost of elections. Capital spending was limited, the cost of borrowing had increased significantly despite action taken by officers to protect against rising interest rates. There was a prioritisation of resources to align with priorities in the corporate plan.

Kevin McDaniel, Executive Director of People, said that adult social care was around £40 million of the council's expenditure. There was a focus on independent living for all residents, ensuring that long term care worked, self-service assessment could be run and to ensure that there were fair contributions from all who should pay. Short term controls were needed while the budget was embedded in the Medium Term Financial Plan. Support would be reduced for some non-statutory service elements while there would be limited staff capacity in statutory, community and provider services. As a result of the pandemic, there were more people in residential and nursing homes now than there had been before and there was a £3.5 million budget shortfall at the start of 2022-23. Other opportunities were being explored, for example workforce recruitment and retention investments to reduce the risk of workforce options.

On housing and environmental services, Kevin McDaniel said that there continued to be a significant number of families that needed temporary accommodation. Skills would be combined across teams to provide a full service offer. Grant funding would be used as an opportunity to align the service with the corporate plan priorities, while it was planned that under-utilised properties would be used as temporary accommodation. On financial risks, Kevin McDaniel highlighted the loss of income on Hackney Carriage Licenses, the increased pressure on housing due to the cost of living crisis and increased demand for temporary accommodation.

Kevin McDaniel concluded by talking about the children's services budget. A new case management system would be implemented which would help to drive efficiency and provide new options for electronic ways of working. Legal support would be focused on the most needed cases, to ensure resource prioritisation. Family hubs would be scaled back to statutory only services and staff capacity would be limited by implementing agency limits.

Emma Duncan, Monitoring Officer and Director of Law, Governance and Public Health, said that core governance services would be prioritised to ensure that assurances could be given to the council on the governance framework. Resources were also being focused on key risk areas such as contract, procurement and democratic processes. The growth bid reflected the recommendations which had been made from the Peer Review, which has taken place earlier in the year. Issues and risks included levels of challenge to decisions made, recruitment challenges and staffing budgets.

Andrew Durrant, Executive Director of Place, said the main approach was to take a strategic and collaborative view across the service, maintaining essential and statutory services which were underpinned by quality. Priority setting had been done through the corporate plan and areas had been identified to maximise commercial activity and income generation opportunities. Risks included historic contracts, post pandemic behaviour and the national economic outlook. Opportunities like the Berkshire County Deal could open up new funding opportunities, while strategic relationships would help to maximise grant income. Andrew

Durrant provided some detail to the Panel on the savings and growth bids for the place directorate budget.

Adele Taylor outlined the resources budget, there was a focus on contract management particularly around IT contracts, as these underpinned the whole organisation. Future years pressures would be around new external audit contracts and there would be improved debt management opportunities. Although not included in the service, there would be a number of 'below the line' items impacted by actions by the service, for example the amount of council tax collected.

Andrew Vallance, Head of Finance, explained that the capital review board had considered all capital bids which had been made by service areas and had made its recommendations to Cabinet. Fully funded schemes were agreed, these were mostly funded by government grants, with as much CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) as possible, where appropriate. Considering affordability, the increased interest rates had a huge impact on revenue budgets, while there had been a reduction in new borrowing. Slippage was under constant review by officers. The total capital programme was around £40 million, with £27.5 million being funded through borrowing.

Adele Taylor set out the governing principles of the Medium Term Financial Plan, a number of these linked in with the aims of service areas when setting their budgets. The budget needed to be balanced legally, with the approach being to manage finances sustainably. It was anticipated that detailed financial information for local authorities from the government would be published the week beginning 19th December, estimates of government funding had been included in the draft budget. This would be refined following the government announcement and the policy statement which was due shortly.

Adele Taylor concluded the presentation by explaining the pathway to the budget being approved. The consultation had been launched and would allow residents to provide feedback on the draft budget. Cabinet would consider the engagement feedback and would propose the final budget in early February, this would go to Full Council at the end of February for final approval.

The Panel heard from a member of the public, Mr Paul Hinton, who was representing the RBWM Climate Emergency Coalition. He felt that this was not the time to reduce the overall budget made available to deliver upon the commitments set out in the council's Environment and Climate Strategy, and the corporate plan's priority to tackle climate change and its consequences. In the draft budget, it was proposed that £100,000 of the £250,000 budgeted for supporting the Climate Partnership would no longer come from the revenue budget, this would instead come from CIL payments. Mr Hinton felt that this was equal to a £100,000 reduction in spend on the delivery of the strategy.

Mr Hinton said that the CIL payments were meant to remedy damage caused by development and should be in addition to projects delivered through the Climate Partnership. However, when used as defined in this budget, he felt that this was no benefit. Mr Hinton highlighted to the Panel that in order to meet the council's commitment to reduce carbon emissions, the budget would be relying on development, which was one of the activities that caused them. When RBWM had declared the emergency, the council committed to call on the government to provide additional powers and resources which ensured that the council could help deliver on national emissions targets. Mr Hinton asked if the council could confirm what had been done in this regard, to avoid a significant overall reduction in funds allocated to one of this Council's top three priorities.

The Chairman felt that some important points had been raised by Mr Hinton, the council needed to reduce its carbon footprint. Overall statements as part of the budget would be useful so that the Panel and public could understand where reductions would happen. It could also be something for another Overview and Scrutiny Panel to consider, should there be further questions.

Councillor Bond noted that transport was both a growth item and a saving, which involved S106 money. As this was the form of funding, it was classed as a capital investment and was designed to improve services above the current level, Councillor Bond asked if this presumption was correct. On adult services, he understood that the approach was to encourage residents to stay in their own homes for longer, although the risk was that some residents could need to stay in hospital. Councillor Bond asked if this approach had been shared with NHS partners, he suggested that this could be considered by the Health and Wellbeing Board at a future meeting. He considered the savings that had been proposed, it was like a spectrum with the majority of savings affecting frontline services.

Andrew Durrant said that there had been some positive feedback received about bus services, there had been an offer of free bus travel in the build up to Christmas. The S106 funds that were being used were already in the budget and had been allocated to public transport. They could be both revenue and capital funds depending on the S106 agreement.

Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth, said that bus companies were under a lot of pressure in the current economic climate. There had been a significant amount of funding provided by the Department for Transport to support bus services, the growth bid reflected the expectation that there would not be funding of this level from the government going forward.

Kevin McDaniel responded to Councillor Bond's questions on adult social care. The reason why the council wanted residents to be at home was because the outcomes were usually better, provided this was the correct choice. Moving patients straight from hospital to care homes often meant that more independence was lost. Kevin McDaniel confirmed that he would be happy to have an item come to a Health and Wellbeing Board meeting, in collaboration with NHS partners, which considered how the service could help residents lead independent lives. He had been in regular contact with the NHS RBWM Place Convenor about making sure the care system could work as well it could for residents of the borough.

ACTION – Item to be submitted to the Health & Wellbeing Board for consideration at a future meeting.

The Chairman commented on the adult social care reforms, he asked if there was any certainty that this would impact on the budget.

Kevin McDaniel said that until the detail was seen by officers, there would be some caution.

Adele Taylor said that they had tried to indicate where impacts would be felt from the savings that were proposed. Transformation could lead to savings, but savings did not directly lead to transformation, it was important not to transform just to make savings.

Councillor Price said at the last meeting of the Panel, there had been a report considered on a refresh of the corporate plan. However, she did not feel that the budget reflected what had been discussed at the meeting. Councillor Price had carefully considered the equality impact assessments and understood that around half of the budget lines would affect those that were elderly, those that were disabled and those that were poor. The residents survey also highlighted the groups of residents who were dissatisfied, it was the same group of people. Councillor Price noted that comments had been made in the consultation for the budget that it was focused on those most vulnerable in society, but this was not reflected on the equality impact assessments submitted by service areas. She asked if the assessments were therefore accurate and if the council received more money from the government, could this be invested in those groups of residents who needed it most.

Tony Reeves, Interim Chief Executive, said that the refresh of the corporate plan was due to be considered by Cabinet early in the new year. The council was faced with huge challenges on interest rates and the cost of borrowing, it had been difficult to set a legal, balanced budget.

The equality impact assessments were in draft form and would continue to be developed, they identified the risks and challenges which were currently being dealt with by the council in the current economic climate.

Councillor Price felt that residents were not being told the full truth, it would be difficult for those who were not healthy and well off. Community organisations would need to be provide more support to these groups as a result.

Tony Reeves responded by saying that there was support for residents provided by the council in the current economic crisis, new funding streams were coming in and the council was working closely with the voluntary sector to distribute this funding. Resources would be deployed against the priorities of the council, to ensure key services continued and that the council was also financially robust. A stable financial position would allow RBWM to make significant progress for residents over the coming years.

The Chairman suggested that Councillor Price could raise direct issues with any of the equality impact assessments with officers and Cabinet Members, to see if any improvements could be made.

Councillor Sharpe said that officers had attempted to deliver a balanced budget, he asked what the budget looked like for the average resident and also how the budget affected the use of services.

Adele Taylor said that it was a difficult question to answer, there were not many average residents as all circumstances were different. The council had a corporate plan and the budget provided the resources to deliver that plan, having a balanced budget allowed the council to control its own destiny. An unbalanced budget would only allow a council to deliver its minimum statutory services, RBWM was not in this position. Around 80% of the borough's funding was spent on the most vulnerable residents.

Kevin McDaniel said that it was clear on the website what services were provided for adult social care, to allow residents to continue to enjoy their lives and so that individuals felt empowered to live an independent life for longer.

Lin Ferguson, Director of Children's Services, added that the council needed to prioritise the most vulnerable. For young children, it was important to develop family resilience and communities could support vulnerable people. The council could intervene where there were gaps, officers were keen to work with voluntary organisations and families to build resilience and increase independence.

Councillor Sharpe said that the emerging need from residents should be considered, so that the council was aware of where challenges would be coming from. He commented that the budget was only balanced if all savings which had been proposed were achieved, Councillor Sharpe asked how confident officers were that savings would be achieved.

Councillor Knowles passed on his gratitude to the finance team, it was hard to set a balanced budget and make decisions on trimming services. He was concerned about the staff headcount and the increased pressure that some staff would be under, this would not help retention. Councillor Knowles hoped that the questions which had been submitted and answered in advance of the meeting would be published as they contained detail on a number of budget lines. A lot of savings were marked as 'explore', or 'investigate', and this needed some clarification. Councillor Knowles suggested that each line should be considered by either the People or the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panels, as appropriate, which would allow for focused discussion. On interest rate and debt assumptions, Councillor Knowles asked what risk mitigations were in place should these assumptions not be correct.

Adele Taylor confirmed that the questions and answers could be published as a supplement to the agenda after the meeting. The Audit and Governance Committee had an oversight role of

the treasury management strategy and the capital strategy, there had discussion at the Committee about how to de-risk rising interest rates. The council worked closely with their financial advisors, Arlingclose. The impact of interest rates had been mitigated through borrowing throughout the year, along with long term fixed borrowing.

Councillor Knowles felt that each overview and scrutiny panel would be able to consider the budget with fresh eyes which would ensure more productive scrutiny, it was not possible for the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel to consider all the budget lines at this meeting.

Tony Reeves said that the council did not yet have the financial settlement from the government, the budget was still in draft form. The cost of borrowing had changed dramatically in the last few months and could change before the budget was set. The budget consultation process offered both Members and residents the opportunity to provide detailed feedback. Having each line considered by each Panel would distort the process, it should be viewed as a whole compared to the priorities set out in the corporate plan.

The Chairman said that concerns had been raised by Members as part of the questions which had been submitted in advance of the meeting and these would be picked up officers and Cabinet Members to consider if any changes to budget proposals were needed.

Councillor Knowles felt that further scrutiny was required, as the answers to these questions could not be challenged further and some answers needed some clarification.

Adele Taylor highlighted that the page for the budget consultation had gone live, she encouraged all Members to share this link with residents, voluntary groups and other organisations. A single email inbox had been set up to deal with and answer questions on the budget for councillors, any additional questions that Members had would be answered as soon as possible by the finance team. A briefing session would take place with each political group, which provided a further opportunity for questions to be asked.

Tony Reeves added that all feedback received through the consultation would feed back in to the revised equality impact assessments. This was a transparent process, Full Council set and agreed the budget.

Councillor Story thanked the finance team for providing the answers to all of the questions which had been submitted by Members. There was a lot of uncertainty around the next financial year, with some of the answers given by officers not giving an exact answer as further work needed to be done, this was understandable. However, Councillor Story asked in light of this uncertainty, how confident were officers that the savings outlined in the budget could be delivered.

Adele Taylor said that the budget was in draft form, if some of the work did not have deliverability it could be altered before the final budget was submitted to Full Council. She needed to also produce a section 25 report, this was a personal statement from the Executive Director of Resources which discussed the robustness of estimates and described the methodology which had been used. Potential risks would be included and this also included risks external to the council. Officers believed that they could deliver the estimates in the budget.

Tony Reeves added that throughout the process of developing the budget proposals, the Corporate Leadership Team had been challenged extensively to ensure that any optimism bias had been removed and the budget was as robust as it could be, at the current stage.

Councillor Story noted that around 80% of council tax was spent on adult social care, he asked if this was similar to last year.

He was informed that it was a slightly greater proportion of council tax being spent in this area, compared to the last financial year. It had been around 78% previously.

Councillor Story asked how this compared with other local authorities.

Adele Taylor said this figure was comparable with other local authorities, it was slightly higher due to the low council tax base in RBWM.

Kevin McDaniel said that considering the amount of money spent per person who needed support from the council, RBWM was a good value authority. The council was an outlier on specific services, for example placements for young people and residential placements for adults.

Councillor Story commented on unaccompanied asylum seeking children, there was a figure in the budget of £713,000. He understood that the council had an obligation to accept a certain number of children, Councillor Story felt that the council was doing more than other local authorities.

Kevin McDaniel said that an unaccompanied asylum seeker under the age of 18 was treated as a child in care. The council received £1,000 a week up until the child was 18, the average across the country was that money would pay for the accommodation of the asylum seeker, but not the cost of the teams that supported asylum seekers. The number of children in care from local families was at around 100, while there were 35 unaccompanied asylum seekers. RBWM received no infrastructure costs to cover the 35 asylum seekers, £713,000 was the investment the council needed to make. In total, the council spent about £1 million a year on unaccompanied asylum seekers, Ukrainian families were not included in this as they were covered by a separate government grant. RBWM was one of two councils in the south east running at 100% of the target in this area.

Councillor Story asked if there was any prospect of government support to help the council with the £1 million investment it had earmarked for unaccompanied asylum seekers.

Kevin McDaniel explained that at the current point in time, there was no intention from the government to change any of the support grants or policy statements.

Councillor Story asked about reserves, he said that the purpose of reserves was to mitigate financial shocks.

Adele Taylor said that all council's needed reserves to cover unforeseen incidents, this was called general fund reserves. RBWM had historically low reserves, being previously close to the minimal level recommended. This level was calculated by the financial risks in the system. In years where the contingency sum had not been used, this had been put into the reserves. The council also had ear marked reserves, these were reserved for specific purposes, for example an election.

Councillor Story concluded his questions by asking about council tax. He said that RBWM was very low compared to neighbouring authorities, for example, Reading Borough Council was over £600 more a year for the same council tax band. Councillor Story asked if this would be the same for the next financial year.

Adele Taylor said that she could not comment on the council tax policies of other authorities, but she imagined that most would take the opportunity to increase the amount charged by some level. However, a 5% increase for RBWM would raise less money than a 5% increase for an authority which already had a higher rate of council tax. The government assumed that local authorities would raise their council tax by the maximum amount possible, if an authority chose not to do this it could lead to a greater erosion of finances. Residents should be aware of the support that could be provided, like the council tax reduction scheme.

Councillor Shelim said that the consultation gave all residents the opportunity to be part of the budget proposals. He asked why the council was looking to recruit a full time scrutiny officer.

Emma Duncan said that the peer review recommendations highlighted that a scrutiny officer would provide extensive support to the scrutiny function. Scrutiny was an important part of making sure that decisions were made in the right way, resources had therefore been focused on this function.

Councillor Werner said that there were a number of savings lines in the budget which increased the risk of the welfare of children and young people. He had noted an admission earlier in the meeting that the resources of the budget did not allow all of the corporate plan priorities to be fulfilled. Reducing services in the family hub to statutory only would have a significant impact on vulnerable families and would increase spending. Without the family hubs, Councillor Werner felt that it would be difficult to teach family resilience. There were a number of items in the budget that were labelled as 'review', which came to a total of approximately £5 million, with a number being amber or red in terms of achievability. Councillor Werner believed that the budget was not balanced, he felt that the review lines were put in to give the appearance of a balanced budget. It was a scary budget and needed further scrutiny, he felt that lines of the budget should be considered by each of the relevant scrutiny panels.

Tony Reeves said that it was not regarded as a scary budget by officers. The budget was at an early stage and there were a couple of months to go before the process concluded, the council would have an updated position on the financial settlement from the government which would provide further clarity. Officers were as confident as they could be currently.

Kevin McDaniel said that the children's services budget was still £27 million, with the majority of this money prioritised on those children that were at immediate or significant risk of harm. The budget did not reduce the amount of money available for early help and prevention services, transformation would help to ensure that less was spent on the crisis service and more was spent further down the line. Kevin McDaniel said that he was happy to have any meetings with Members to answer any further detailed questions on the children's services budget.

Councillor Werner asked a number of detailed questions:

- On the reduction in education welfare support, new statutory requirements for attendance support had been put in place but were not funded by the government. He asked if this saving would reduce the support to the new statutory level in order for the council to meet the cost rather than schools.
- On youth offending, much of what the team did was statutory so there was very little that could be cut. The team could not be restructured without consultation from the Youth Justice Board to ensure that the council met statutory duties, caseloads had increased 66% in the past year and this was expected to continue to rise. How confident were the administration that the council would be able to fulfil its statutory duties after this saving was made.
- On the SEND service team, this was being reduced to the statutory level which was to consider EHCP applications within 20 weeks. Officers expected timeliness would reduce from 80%. Councillor Werner asked how would the increased risk of expensive parent led tribunals and complaints be managed within the budget.
- 2485 pupils were classed as SENCO on the SEND register and they would now not be eligible for support. Councillor Werner asked if this was correct and could be justified.

- On the removal of non-statutory children's hub services, Councillor Werner asked if the only statutory services that the family hub had to provide were in relation to children in care.
- The overall cost of non-statutory family hub services was more than the £480,000 saving in the budget. From initial questions, it was suggested that £450,000 of the family hub budget was from the strengthening families funding which was specifically for early help interventions. Councillor Werner asked if this money was ring fenced for early help only, and what would happen to this funding if the council ceased to provide more than statutory services.
- Councillor Werner asked why were the health visiting team being offered as a substitute for non-statutory family hub services.
- Councillor Werner concluded his questions on asking what would happen with the child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation work that protected young people and how many young people could be put at risk.

The Chairman advised Councillor Werner that these questions could be submitted to officers and the relevant Cabinet Member after the meeting, as they were complex and would require detailed answers.

Kevin McDaniel said that he was happy to answer the questions after the meeting and for the answers to be circulated to the Panel and published as a supplement to the minutes.

ACTION – Answers to Councillor Werner's questions to be circulated and published once they were ready.

Councillor Price asked how many full time employees would be affected by proposals made in the budget. She noted that the Panel were not told which items were not changing or what the amount would be, for example she did not know if community grants would be changing. Councillor Price felt that she would have more confidence if lines which were still under review were discounted from the budget, she asked if this had been considered by the finance team.

Adele Taylor said that the number of affected RBWM employees was in the single digits. Optalis and Achieving for Children were separate companies, but Adele Taylor was happy to provide the exact figure after the meeting for RBWM. There had been challenge sessions with the finance team to ensure that review lines were challenged effectively. The budget was still in draft form and could change, there was also a contingency line in the budget, this would deal with non-delivery of savings where an alternative could not found along with one off items that could occur. This was included in the budget every year.

ACTION – Adele Taylor to provide the number of RBWM employees affected by the budget.

Andrew Durrant confirmed that community grants would continue and was in the budget going forward, work was being done to investigate the benefits of a community lottery. He was happy to see if he could help any organisation which needed the support of the council.

Councillor Price said that the budget showed which areas had increased and decreased. However, she felt like she could not make a decision on whether there were enough community wardens, for example, as she did not know how many there currently were.

Adele Taylor clarified that the decision that Full Council would make would be on the budget with detailed additions and reductions to the existing budget. Resources were linked to outcomes, if priorities in the corporate plan were not being achieved, growth bids would be

added to the budget. It was the role of the finance team to ensure that there was enough resource to fulfill the corporate priorities.

Councillor Price proposed that all items in the budget related to the place directorate would be considered by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel and that all items related to the people directorate were referred to the People Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This was seconded by Councillor Knowles.

A named vote was taken.

Refer all place items to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel and all people items to the People Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Motion)	
Councillor Gerry Clark	For
Councillor John Story	For
Councillor Simon Bond	For
Councillor Gary Muir	For
Councillor Neil Knowles	For
Councillor Helen Price	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	Against
Councillor Shamsul Shelim	Against
Councillor Chris Targowski	For
Carried	

RESOLVED: That all items in the budget related to the place directorate were referred to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel and all items in the budget related to the people directorate were referred to the People Overview & Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Davies thanked Paul Hinton for his comments on climate change in the budget at the start of the meeting. Taking action to prevent climate change and its consequences was one of the council's top three priorities in the corporate plan, she asked if the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel could take a closer look and consider the impact on the community.

The Panel agreed that this could be added into the recommendation, highlighting that the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel should pay particular attention to how action on climate change was being funded in the budget.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel would consider the climate change budget lines in further detail.

Adele Taylor advised that if there was the removal of a saving, alternatives needed to be considered.

Councillor Stimson, Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Sustainability, said that difficult decisions had to be made on the budget. Over 80% of council tax funding was spent on vulnerable children and adults, if this funding was removed then it would need to be found from somewhere else.

Emma Duncan said that the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel could make recommendations to Cabinet on which savings should be removed, but Cabinet had a duty to set a balanced budget.

Andrew Durrant clarified that the council was not looking to reduce the £250,000 which had been committed to the climate partnership over three years. The budget was showing that £100,000 of this funding would come from S106 money, which the council already had. Therefore, there was no change to the amount of money which was being prioritised in this area.

Councillor Hilton, Cabinet Member for Asset Management, Commercialisation, Finance and Ascot, addressed the Panel. He thanked all Panel Members and officers for their time and input into the meeting. Comments on the budget at the meeting were welcomed and would be considered by officers and Cabinet, the budget could be changed before it was agreed by Cabinet and put forward to Full Council in February.

Councillor Price asked if the process for asking questions at the Panel meetings in January could be outlined, for example would non-Panel Members be able to ask questions.

The Chairman agreed that all Members being briefed on the procedure would be useful if appropriate, in advance of the meetings taking place.

Work Programme

The Panel noted the work programme.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 10.05 pm

CHAIR.....

DATE.....