

CABINET

WEDNESDAY 24 JANUARY 2024

PRESENT: Councillors Simon Werner (Chair), Lynne Jones (Vice-Chair), Richard Coe, Geoff Hill, Catherine Del Campo, Adam Bermange, Karen Davies and Amy Tisi

Also in attendance: Councillor Helen Price

Also in attendance virtually: Councillor Mark Wilson

Officers: Oran Norris-Browne, Stephen Evans, Lin Ferguson, Elizabeth Griffiths, Andrew Durrant and Elaine Browne

Officers in attendance virtually: Kevin McDaniel and Becky Hatch

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Reynolds.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

Minutes

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 13 December 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.

Appointments

None

Forward Plan

Cabinet noted the following additions to the Cabinet Forward Plan. All of which were new items.

- Budget 2024/25 – February Cabinet
- Proposal to Establish a Berkshire Joint Committee for Economic Prosperity – February Cabinet
- Public Spaces Protection Orders Consultation – March Cabinet
- School Transport Policy – April Cabinet
- Revocation of Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) within RBWM – May Cabinet
- Review of Air Quality Monitoring Programme for PM2.5 and PM10 – October Cabinet
- Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy – December Cabinet

Councillor Price spoke as a non-Cabinet Member, in which she began by thanking the Cabinet for agreeing to amend the Council's privacy notice surrounding the Council's meetings being streamed on YouTube. These would now be deleted after 5 years from January 2024 onwards, rather than after just 2 years. She then made reference to the budget consultation process and how it was fed back to residents once they had completed it. She wished that once consultations had finished, that residents be informed of what had been decided and

were kept more in the loop. The Chair welcomed this and said that he would see what could be done moving forward.

2023/24 Month 8 Budget Monitoring Report

Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance said that in September 2023, senior officers had warned the Cabinet that the borough was at significant risk of issuing a Section 114 notice. Since then, despite being successful in making savings, the total forecasted overspend for the end of the financial year 2023/24, now sat at approximately £8m. Once contingencies were applied, this would reduce to £4.35m. In month 7, an increased demand was seen in statutory services such as adult services, which saw an increased overspend of £0.700m, which now led to a total overspend of £6.36m. Children's Services had also seen an overspend of £0.580m, due to an increase in placements.

Councillor Jones said that the place directorate had reduced its overspend by £0.800m, which showed that the Council was moving in a good direction when it came to services that it could control and that are not demand driven. It had been reported that around 40 MPs had written to Central Government to provide additional finances to ensure that it could continue to provide essential services and balance its budget. An extra allocation of £500m to assist in covering increases in adult social care costs, which Councillor Jones welcomed, however believed that it was not enough to cover the increased demand.

Councillor Jones then stated that although a balanced budget for 2024/25 had been achieved, all be it with some very difficult and unpleasant decisions, with the current level of overspend as a result of the previous administration's budget, the Council were entering the new financial year with minimal reserves. There was therefore a continued risk of issuing a Section 114 notice.

Councillor Hill, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Customer Service Centre and Employment, asked what impact on RBWM specifically had been made by the 30% reduction in Government grants and also the limiting of Council tax rises by Central Government to just 2.99% per annum. Councillor Jones replied by saying that the borough had seen 6 years of continuous Council tax cuts, this reduced the amount that could be spent on residents. The borough had around £0.0015m per dwelling per year that it could spend, which compared to Reading's £0.0019m. The boroughs spend per dwelling was in the bottom 1% of all local authorities.

Councillor Tisi, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Windsor, wished to comment on Children's Services specifically and said that it was important to focus on demand driven services, such as this service and that children and young people were not just numbers and that safeguarding them was vitally important. Lin Ferguson, Executive Director of Children's Services and Education, said that it was the borough's statutory duty to ensure that children and young people were safeguarded and protected. Since October 2023, 11 children and young persons had come into the care of the borough; 6 of these were in police protection due to concerns over safety; 3 were asylum seekers and 2 were beyond parental control.

Lin Ferguson then said that despite this increase recently, the borough still had fewer Children in Care than the national average and that of the statistical neighbours. She said that placement sufficiency was a significant issue – the borough simply did not have sufficient in-house foster placements (a national issue) and the borough did not have an in-house residential home. Therefore, this placed the borough at the mercy of the market, where placement costs were often very high, and this did not always reflect better quality. Two young people had recently come into the care of the local authority and in placements that each cost £0.234m per year. Lin Ferguson explained that a multi-faceted transformation plan was in development in order to grow the number of in-house placements.

Councillor Price asked if the budget needed to be re-looked at, due to the significant reduced reserves that the Council would be going into the new financial year with. She also asked for clarity over what it would mean if a Section 114 notice was issued. Councillor Jones said that until the end of the year, the Cabinet would endeavour to fix the financial challenges and that work had not stopped, even though a balanced budget had been drafted. The governance of the process had been improved significantly, including scrutiny and performance management. The Spending Control Panel was also being seen to make improvements in terms of spending.

Elizabeth Griffiths, Executive Director of Resources, said that if a Section 114 notice was indeed issued, then this would mean persons coming in to take control of spending on services who were not local and not familiar with the borough's residents and services. She then echoed the comments on the hard work that was ongoing as Councillor Jones had said. A lot of the transformation work that was being planned for the next year, would be with an aim to ensure that these issues would not be seen again, taking a prevention approach. Historically low Council tax gave the borough a very difficult position to start from, coupled with the percentage increases that were all that's allowed, which led to the borough having significantly less to spend compared to neighbouring authorities.

Stephen Evans, Chief Executive, said that if access did become available to further money, then the recommendation of officers would be for this to be allocated into the reserves. For both adult social care and children's, budgets were going up significantly, however savings were also being proposed too. There was also a massive trade-off between an achievable and challenging budget. The LGA had identified a £4 billion gap in funding for local authorities, the Secretary of State had asked the Treasury for £1 billion, but only £500m was given, to which RBWM did not yet know how much of this would be allocated to them.

The Chair then thanked Councillor Jones, Elizabeth Griffiths, and her team for all of their hard work during the budget process.

AGREED: Cabinet noted the report and:

- i) **noted the forecast revenue outturn for the year was an overspend on services of £8.009m which reduced to an overspend of £4.347m when including unallocated contingency budgets and changes to funding budgets (para 5);**
- ii) **noted the forecast capital outturn was expenditure of £43.960m against a budget of £88.267m (para 11).**

Quarterly Assurance Report Q2 2023-24 or where latest information is available until October 2023

The Chair, Councillor Werner, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Community Partnerships, Public Protection and Maidenhead, introduced the Quarterly Assurance Report to Cabinet. He said that this was the 2nd new and improved report to come to Cabinet and that despite the financial challenges that were being seen, the Council was continuing to see strong performance across all services. Growing staffing concerns within the Council meant that the Council were quite reliant on agency staff, which of course came with an extra cost. He admitted that the borough struggled nationally, as the borough's salaries were very much out of step with other local authorities. Another key issue was housing, with cost of living rises and a growing number of asylum seekers, being seen to continually put strain upon the service. The draft budget was very much dependable on the transformation programme and that the Cabinet were working very hard with officers to fix the mess.

Councillor Del Campo, Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Housing Services, commended the well written report, including the metrics and the data that was clearly set out. She said that permanent staff were of course always preferred compared to the use of agency staff, however acknowledged that this was not always possible to ensure safe levels of working.

Councillor Del Campo then said that something was being trialled in the adult social care team, which was to use small amounts of long-term underspend to increase pay. The aim of this was to reward loyalty and reduce dependencies on agency staff. In addition to this, there had recently been good news in terms of the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework (ASCOF) ratings, which rated persons perceptions of adult social care. She then placed on record her thanks to the teams in Optalis and RBWM, especially during the recent flooding, where colleagues worked to ensure vulnerable residents were cared for.

Kevin McDaniel, Executive Director of Adults, Health & Communities, wished to talk to the ASCOF report, that Councillor Del Campo mentioned. He said that 275 RBWM residents took part in the survey and ranked the borough highly nationally for adult social care. The borough were ranked 4th for overall satisfaction and 1st for the value added to quality of life.

Councillor Bermange, Cabinet Member for Planning, Legal & Asset Management thanked the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel for their comments on the previous report that had gone to Cabinet and said that this was a very valuable contribution. He then spoke on planning specifically and the progress that was being made to identify flaws in the system. He drew Cabinet's attention to table 4 of the report.

Stephen Evans wished to echo the comments of Councillor Bermange around scrutiny and said that good governance was essential, which he had seen strong examples of so far during his time so far at the borough.

AGREED: Cabinet noted the report and reviewed the Quarterly Assurance Report setting out progress against the performance indicators and risk register.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 7.40 pm

CHAIR.....

DATE.....