

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Recommendations of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the draft Budget 2023/2024 and Medium-Term Financial Plan – General Fund Revenue and Capital

1 Recommendations

1.1 It is recommended that:

- 1.1.1** This report is forwarded to the Executive Director – Finance (Chief Finance Officer) to be appended to the report to Cabinet and then to full Council on the budget 2023/2024 and Medium-Term Financial Plan – General Fund Revenue and Capital and Housing Revenue Account; and the following recommendations of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee are highlighted:

1.1.2 Fees and Charges

Having carried out scrutiny on the Fees and Charges contained within the draft budget and having received a detailed presentation from the Executive Director – Finance which addressed all the elements set out in the terms of reference for the scrutiny work on Fees and Charges members of the Committee were generally supportive of the approach adopted on Fees and Charges.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that a Communications Plan is put together for some of the main fees and charges which focusses on the increase in cash terms rather than in percentage terms which can be misleading. It should also highlight that benchmarking information was used to be able to propose an increase in various Fees and Charges.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee informs Cabinet that it welcomes the removal of the proposed car parking charges for the Racecourse and requests that should there be a revised car parking proposal for the Racecourse that it is subject to pre-decision Scrutiny.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomes the review that is underway on the final proposals for car parking charges across West Northamptonshire and strongly recommends that there is a period of free parking at weekends.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee asks Cabinet to consider reducing the proposed daily charge of £12 for parking at the Country Parks.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet considers a Car Parking Strategy aligned to the Council's sustainability objectives.

1.1.3 Capital Programme

Cabinet is informed that that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is concerned that adequate budget is available for the Council to be net Zero by 2030 and that there needs to be a costed plan setting out how this will be achieved.

Cabinet is informed that in general, Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is satisfied that Cabinet has capital programme monitoring and oversight in place.

Cabinet is reminded to keep a portfolio of projects that could be available should external funding become available.

Robustness of Budgets

1.1.4 Care

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee can see that budgets for both Adults and Children's Social Care have increased significantly for next year to reflect current levels of demand for the service and provision for some continued increase in demand over next year. The budget for Adults Services has increased by £22.1 million (21%) and Children's Services by £8.8 million (13%) which the Committee acknowledges are large sums of money.

The Committee acknowledges that the budgets have been put together using the best information currently available and therefore are as robust as they could be at the time of setting the budget.

However, given it is difficult to foresee the future demand in the need for Children's and Adult's services and how this will affect budgets for both services, Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers that the budget for both Children's and Adult's services is an area of ongoing risk to the Council's budget for 2023/24.

General

The Committee acknowledges that there was approximately £48 million of base budget changes and believes that this budget should be more accurate and more deliverable than previous versions.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee requests that there is earlier scrutiny involvement in the budget process, in particular in relation to the capital programme. It is further requested that this Committee engages with Cabinet in the summer 2023 regarding the draft budget.

2 Purpose

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the comments of West Northamptonshire Council's Corporate Overview and Scrutiny committee on the draft Budget 2023/2024 and Medium-Term Financial Plan – General Fund Revenue and Capital.

3 Context and Background

- 3.1 Budget scrutiny is included within the work programme 2022/2023 for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee).
- 3.2 At its meeting on 7 November 2022 (**meeting 1**), the Committee commenced its budget Scrutiny process for 2023/24 focussing on the Northamptonshire Children's Trust budget and the key cost drivers to the Children's Trust budget . At this meeting the Committee agreed it would undertake budget scrutiny over a series of four meetings.

Meeting 2 (5 January 2023)– The Committee considered and scrutinised the draft Budget 2023/2024 and confirmed its budget scrutiny process.

Meeting 3 (10 January 2023) The Committee, in the form of a Task and Finish Group put key questions to the Leader of the Council, Assistant Cabinet Member for Finance and the Executive Director for Finance (Chief Finance Officer) on key areas of the budget.

The Committee also identified three areas of the draft budget to focus on:

- Fees and Charges
- Capital Programme
- Care – Robustness of Budgets

The Committee requested:

- Interim results of the Budget Consultation process as they are received and these have been provided
- For the capital and revenue budget to be mapped to the priorities of the Council and this has been provided.

Meeting 4 (31 January 2023) – At this meeting the Committee, which took the form of a Task and Finish Group of the whole Committee, Members received a short update on the draft Budget by the Chief Finance Officer who made reference to any changes that had emerged since the draft budget 2023/24 was produced.

Following the short address of the Chief Finance Officer, the Task and Finish Group then split into three breakout groups, each looking at one of the key areas of the draft budget that had been identified previously. The lead councillor from each breakout group fed back the views and comments of each of the breakout groups. Each breakout group had 45 minutes to consider the key areas.

Meeting 5 – The Committee at its meeting on 6 February 2023, agreed its final report which comprises a summary of the outcome of its budget scrutiny and recommendations to Cabinet.

4 Budget Scrutiny

- 4.1 At its meeting on 7 November 2022 (**meeting 1**), the Committee commenced its budget Scrutiny process for 2023/24 focussing on the Northamptonshire Children's Trust budget and the key cost drivers to the Children's Trust budget which were an increase in children's social care cases in the care system, and increased number of children in care, increased cost and reduced availability of placements, increasing independent fostering agency fees, and workforce pressures. Additional pressures aside from the key cost drivers included the contract negotiation and the implementation of a staff pay award above the contract sum provision (£1.9m) based on the flat rate of increase of £1,925. There were also additional pressures related to demand growth in children's placements (£4.380m), inflationary increases above the contract sum in placements (£2.062m) and transport (0.675m), the non-delivery of £1.2m for the development of children's homes which had been built into future savings forecasts following the confirmation of capital funding in October 2022, and a cost of £0.844m following a Local Government Ombudsman judgement relating to adoption. The information on cost drivers of the Children's Trust budget was fully utilised in informing the Committee's budget scrutiny activity at latter meetings of the process (meeting 3).
- 4.2 At its meeting on 5 January 2023 (**meeting 2**) the Task and Finish Group considered and scrutinised the draft Budget 2023/2024 and decided how it would undertake budget scrutiny.
- 4.3 At its meeting on 10 January 2023 (**meeting 3**) The Committee in the form of a Task and Finish Group put key questions to the Leader of the Council, Assistant Cabinet Member for Finance and the Executive Director for Finance (Chief Finance Officer) on key areas of the budget:

Overview and Scrutiny Involvement and Engagement

- The Committee agreed that the scale of the Council's financial deficit could have been shared with the Committee when this had become apparent in September 2022. Sharing this information earlier would have led to more transparency and could have provided a more open and coordinated response for all staff and Members to work together on this.
- There is a need for Cabinet to work with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to improve information sharing, so that when challenges arise in the future they do not come as a surprise, this will improve preparedness, collaboration, and resilience of the wider Council along with establishing more trust between the Cabinet and non-Executives. Cabinet should make use of the knowledge and experience of all Members of the Council.

Draft Budget Consultation Process

- As requested, the Committee was provided with the interim consultation reports on the draft budget 2023/2024 in order to provide detail on the emerging themes of the consultation.

Corporate Plan, Strategic Vision and Business Intelligence

- In response to how the strategic plan would deliver the Council's commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2030, the Leader of the Council advised that West Northamptonshire Council is now a member of UK100, which is a network of local leaders who have pledged to lead a rapid transition to Net Zero with Clean Air in their communities ahead of the government's legal target which will inform the strategic plan how the Council will deliver its commitment to become carbon neutral by 2030.
- The Council will be publishing its energy efficiency report on a regular basis in order to understand our carbon footprint, emissions, and progress towards the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Work is underway to understand how Capital budgets could be earmarked for capital works, however in the immediate future there were plans to add more solar panels to the roof of One Angel Square, and to make the best use of the Council's buildings estate as part of the ongoing office optimisation project.
- The Business Intelligence service interacts with all other services Council-wide, in order to compile performance data to ensure that services are performing well and identified priorities are monitored and delivered against. Performance is monitored within services and owned by service Directors. Performance data is provided to both the Executive Programme Board and Executive Leadership Team.
- Home to School Transport service for the county was hosted by West Northamptonshire Council and provided to North Northamptonshire Council, however this had recently been disaggregated. It is provided the following services:
 - Home to school transport for pupils of statutory school age (4 – 16 inclusive) under s509 of the Education Act 1996.
 - Pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) of statutory school age
 - Students aged 16-18 in further education and continuing students aged 19 and over
 - Children's Social Care Transport, including respite care transport and family visits
 - Adult Social Care Transport

- 4.3 At its meeting on 31 January 2023 (**meeting 4**) which took the form of a Task and Finish Group, the whole Committee received a short update on the draft Budget by the Chief Finance Officer who made reference to any changes that had emerged since the draft budget was produced.

Following the short address of the Chief Finance Officer, the Task and Finish Group then split into three breakout groups, each looking at one of the key areas of the draft Budget that had been identified previously.

key areas of the draft Budget 2023/2024 were considered by "Breakout Groups" of the Budget Task and Finish Group in relation to:

- Fees and Charges
- Capital Programme
- Care - Robustness of Budgets

The Lead Councillor from each Breakout Group fed back the views and comments of each of the Breakout groups. Each Breakout Group had 45 minutes to consider the key areas.

Fees and Charges

The comments and questions that the Task and Finish Group raised in relation to fees and charges were around the issues as detailed below:

- There is a need to communicate that the proposed increases in Fees and Charges as an absolute amount rather than communicate the percentage increase.
- A recent meeting with the BID and traders had been held regarding the proposed increases and changes to car parking charges in central Northampton. Traders had conveyed concerns regarding the current regeneration that is taking place in the town and the disruption to the town centre. They appreciated the Cultural Quarter and the night time economy but felt that similar to other town centres, Northampton town centre is struggling and the increase in parking could affect shoppers, events and those attending church. The Cabinet Member noted the comments and emphasised the costs of maintaining car parks and the Council cannot keep absorbing these costs.
- It was commented that people's salaries are not increasing with inflation which will have a knock on effect on using Council facilities such as car parking.
- The issue of the lack of public transport at night from Towcester to Northampton was highlighted.
- The Breakout Room realised that car parking charges had not increased for four years.
- The Breakout Room noted that Cabinet had withdrawn its decision to propose car parking charges at the Racecourse and there was currently no plan to introduce these at this point, it had been removed from the draft budget proposals. However, the Cabinet Member confirmed that car parking at the Racecourse was a problem as often the car park was full all day, leaving it unavailable for Racecourse users. It was also full in the evenings of vehicles, whose owners were not necessarily using the facilities at the Racecourse.
- In response to a query regarding the proposed all day charge of £12 for parking at the country parks, the Breakout Room heard that the proposal was to harmonise the country parks - Daventry and Brixworth. Research had been undertaken that had shown when people use the parks. Season tickets would also be offered at a cost of £100 per year that could be used for both parks. Comments received as part of the consultation process would be considered regarding the charges. The breakout room acknowledged the value of a season ticket for those who used the country parks on a regular basis.
- The breakout room considered the information provided and understood the rationale for the proposed increases to the building control fees.
- There is a need to ensure that residents continue to support the green waste collection service and it is important to communicate that a fee of £55 per a year, costs just over £1 a week, rather than highlight the percentage increase of approximately 30% to £55 per bin from £42 per bin.
- Concerns were raised that replacement or newly issued black bins are now of a smaller size and larger families often appear to require the larger sized black bin. They should be encouraged and advised how to recycle.
- The benefit of offering a direct debit provision for the payment of the charge of green waste collection was raised. It was welcomed that the Place Directorate is working closely with Finance regarding direct debit payments. It was noted that this could be resource heavy. A

monthly direct debit was not currently offered but residents could sign up for the year and then pay this fee by direct debit annually.

Capital Programme

The Breakout Group made the following comments in relation to the budget for the Capital Programme:

- As part of scrutinising the capital programme budget the breakout Room looked at contingencies and the carry over of £5 million from the previous financial year
- The breakout room recognised that borrowing is used as a last resort as schemes that have a degree of either full or partial self-financing are always prioritised.
- The breakout room considered Net Zero and how this is interwoven into the Corporate Plan. It was concerned whether there is a large enough allocation in the draft budget for this, and whether 2030 was achievable
- The breakout room was advised that if there was an overspend, assurances were provided on where this would come from.
- Regarding pipeline projects there is a lot of feasibility work being undertaken for future applications for levelling up funding.
- In general, Members were very impressed with the monitoring, oversight and grasp that officers have over capital budget matters.

Care – Robustness of Budgets

The comments and questions that this Breakout Group raised in relation to care were around the issues as detailed below:

- The Breakout Room expressed concern regarding family therapies which are a good preventative tool. It noted that the value in care model did have a therapeutic element, this was removed in the former NCC and has created challenges that the Trust faces now. There is also support available to help children have more stable long-term placements.
- In response to a question whether family planning prevention is in place for women who had multiple births with children removed from the home, it was explained that there were a number of interventions and the Assistant Director Commissioning and Partnerships worked with public health around this. The Pause project in Northampton is an example of good work in this area. There are linking initiatives such as 0-19 contracts (NHFT), family hubs, reducing parental conflict training in conjunction with the Children's Trust.
- It was welcomed that WNC is the most cost efficient unitary council in the country for Adult Social Care.
- The breakout room was concerned regarding Adult Social Care and Children's Trust budgets as it was aware the budgets were always overspent as it was a national problem.
- The breakout Room was keen that the voluntary sector could be used in being more supportive in aiding the Council to deliver their statutory duties.
- In response to a question regarding zero hours contracts it was explained that the team needs to look at ways to make sure they had enough staff in place for those requiring

support. Historically zero hours contracts were viewed negatively but in recent trends some individuals preferred this, but zero hours contracts were not viewed favourably by the public.

- The Breakout Room agreed that Cabinet should be informed that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee recognises the importance of funding to meeting demand and a focus on prevention, with earlier intervention is key to preventing children coming into care and acknowledges that it is difficult to demand rises in pressures and the affect these will have on budgets for both Children's and Adult's services.

- 4.5 Attached at **Appendix A** are the notes detailing the deliberations of each Breakout Group on the three key areas from the draft Budget 2023/2024, together with the notes from the meeting that the Task and Finish Group had with the Leader and Assistant Cabinet Member on the draft budget 2023/2024.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Over a series of four meetings the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook in-depth Budget Scrutiny and considered three key areas of the draft Budget 2023/2024: providing comment as part of the West Northamptonshire Council's budget consultation process.
- 5.2 The Committee agreed that its budget scrutiny process had worked very well and had been both engaging, informative and had enabled the Committee to fulfil its budget scrutiny role.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

31 January 2023

Breakout Room - Fees and Charges

Councillors

Councillor Andrew Grant - Lead Councillor for the Breakout Room

Councillors Keith Holland Delamere, Mark Hughes and Koulla Jolley

Cabinet Members

Councillor Phil Larratt, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways, Transport & Waste Services

Councillor David Smith, Community Safety & Engagement, and Regulatory Services

Officers

Martin Henry - Executive Director for Finance (Chief Finance Officer)

Stuart Timmiss – Executive Director for Place, Economy and Environment

Louise Gatehouse - Accountant

Tracy Tiff - Deputy Democratic Services Manager

Scope of the Fees and Charges Budget Scrutiny

- To understand what the approach was in determining fees and charges and what sensitivity analysis was carried out in reaching a view on the increases
- To understand the rationale behind Green Waste increases, Car Parking increases and Building Control increases
- To look at any other emerging themes in the fees and charges and any outliers in terms of the percentage increase

The Breakout Room confirmed that Councillor Andrew Grant would be the lead Councillor for this Group and would report back the recommendations of the Breakout Room to the main Task and Finish Group.

The Executive Director, Finance (Chief Finance Officer), gave the Breakout Room a comprehensive presentation on Fees and Charges which provided the Breakout Room with an understanding of what the approach was in determining fees and charges and what sensitivity analysis had been undertaken in reaching a view on the increases.

Key points:

- Some fees and charges are set by statute for example: Planning
- Some are set on a cost recovery based for example building control and other such as car parking, green waste and leisure are set on "what the market can bear"
- Fees and charges for 2022/23 had been reviewed against current demand level
- A review of controlled charges vs variable and potential income generation had been undertaken.

- A benchmarking analysis had been carried out across other local authorities, both locally and nationally
- An option analysis had taken place which included different charging options and potential impact on demand
- The Service areas provided their expertise and understanding of current market conditions
- The 2023-24 proposed fees and charges (based on service feedback) were then consolidated into the draft budget schedule which were then reviewed to ensure increases in fees and charges were fully costed and detailed within the draft budget as proposals for income generation.

At its earlier budget scrutiny process setting meeting, the Task and Finish Group had determined as part of budget scrutiny for fees and charges Councillors would scrutinise, in particular, the proposals for increases in fees and charges for: Green waste, car parking and building control. The presentation from the Executive Director for Finance (Chief Finance Officer) therefore provided key details on these areas of proposed increases in fees and charges:

Green Waste

The proposed fee increase is from £42.00 to £55.00 (per bin) for Green Waste collection for the year 23-24 which has an estimated additional income built into the draft budget of £726,000 had been calculated with the assumption of an overall decrease of 3% in requests for green waste collection based on the fee increase and had:

- Considered data from 22-23 financial year, which included introduction of charge in South area.
- Benchmarked charges with other Local Authorities had taken place. The charges for green waste of 37 local authorities had been reviewed. There was an average charge of £49.10 in 2022-23. Charges ranged from £40-£80. It had been noted that the majority of the 37 Local Authorities were expected to increase garden waste charge in 2023/2024. When benchmarking took place in 2021, nationally over 72% of Councils charged for garden waste, with prices ranging from £12 to £116 per bin.

The Breakout Room made comment, asked questions and heard:

- There is a need to ensure that residents continue to support the green waste collection service and it is important to communicate that a fee of £55 per a year, costs just over £1 a week, rather than highlight the percentage increase of approximately 30% to £55 per bin from £42 per bin.
- Concerns were raised that replacement or newly issued black bins are now of a smaller size and larger families often appear to require the larger sized black bin. They should be encouraged and advised how to recycle.
- The benefit of offering a direct debit provision for the payment of the charge of green waste collection was realised. It was welcomed that the Place Directorate is working closely with Finance regarding payment. It was noted that this could be resource heavy. A monthly direct debit was not currently offered but residents could sign up for the year and then pay this fee by direct debit annually.

Car Parking Increases

- Car park charges and proposed changes are included in the draft budget 2023/24 to deliver additional income of £1.032 million:
 - Central Northampton: General uplift of 10%, Saturday free period abolished, charges introduced on Sundays
 - Charges introduced at the Racecourse
 - Country park charges harmonised at higher levels
 - More efficient collection practices
- In proposing the increases and by undertaking a sensitivity analysis, it had been assumed that the 10% increase in charges would lead to a 1.67% reduction in demand in parking.
- Car park charges have not increased since 2019 and had car park charges been increased in line with CPI inflation they would have increased by 15.1%
- It is proposed that on-street charges in Northampton would increase from £1.20 to £1.40 per hour which would generate additional income of £0.12 million

The Breakout Room heard, made comment, asked questions and heard:

- There is a need to communicate that the proposed increases to car parking in central Northampton equates to 30 pence an hour, rather than communicate the percentage increase.
- A recent meeting with the BID and traders had been held regarding the proposed increases and changes to car parking charges in central Northampton. Traders had conveyed concerns regarding the current regeneration that is taking place in the town and the disruption to the town centre. They appreciated the Cultural Quarter and the night time economy but felt that similar to other town centres, Northampton town centre is struggling and the increase in parking could affect shoppers, events and those attending church. The Cabinet Member noted the comments and emphasised the costs of maintaining car parks and the Council cannot keep absorbing these costs.
- It was commented that people's salaries are not increasing with inflation which will have a knock on effect on using Council facilities such as car parking.
- The issue of the lack of public transport at night and on Sundays from Towcester to Northampton was highlighted.
- The Breakout Room realised that car parking charges had not increased for four years.
- The Breakout Room noted that Cabinet had withdrawn its decision to propose car parking charges at the Racecourse and there was currently no plan to introduce these, it had been removed from the draft budget proposals. However, the Cabinet Member confirmed that car parking at the Racecourse was a problem as often the car park was full all day, leaving it unavailable for Racecourse users. It was also full in the evenings of vehicles, whose owners were not necessarily using the facilities at the Racecourse.
- In response to a query regarding the proposed all day charge of £12 for parking at the country parks, the Breakout Room heard that the proposal was to harmonise the country parks - Daventry and Brixworth. Research had been undertaken that had shown when people use the parks, often all day, between 1-2 hours. Season tickets would also be offered at a cost of £100 per year that could be used for both parks. Comments received as part of the consultation process would be considered regarding the charges. The Breakout Room

acknowledged the value of a season ticket for those who used the country parks on a regular basis.

Building Control Fee Increases

- Building control fees are proposed to be increased by an average 28%. There are 74 individual charges. This larger percentage increase for 2023-24 is due to fees not being adjusted for 5 years. Fees initially set were based on Northampton so not incorporating additional costs incurred for rural areas. The proposed 2023-24 pricing schedule had been updated and set to new rates to ensure cost recovery
- The proposed increase is estimated to generate additional income of £140,000 (based on average charges)
- Building Control operates against commercial competitors and therefore needs to be mindful of their rates and the service offered
- A separate Building Control account has to operate with fees adjusted so there are no profits or losses made when measured over a three year period
- The proposed increases in charges for 2023-24 had been benchmarked to Warwick District Council. West Northamptonshire Council was part of the Building Control Consortium with Warwickshire County Council up until 31 March 2023 but from April 2023 would be onboarding.

The Breakout Room considered the information provided and understood the rationale for the proposed increases to the building control fees.

Emerging Themes

- Fees and charges have been used more widely in this year's draft budget to protect critical front line services where possible and therefore the approach had been to consider all Fees and Charges, especially fees that had not been increased for a number of years
- Fees and charges are mostly for services where the user of that service has a choice about whether they want that service or not. If they think the charges are too high they can choose not to have the service
- It is also an important principle that the user of a particular service, where possible, pays directly for that service

Outliers

- Many fees are proposed to be increased (where they are not set by statute) by 10%. This is still lower than the level of inflation currently being faced and impacting on the Council's cost base
- Some fees are proposed to be increased by a lot more. These are known as outliers and are highlighted below:
 - Housing HMO (House in Multiple Occupancy) early bird discount (-100%) – Discount has now been deleted
 - On Street Parking Permits (+100%) – Increase from £5.00 to £10.00 and £25 to £50

- Lodge Road Charges (-100%) – Due to vacation of Lodge Road
- Loan of Story Sacks (+100%) – Increase from £1.00 to £2.00
- CON29 Compulsory Purchase (+334.78%) – Increase from £1.15 to £5.00

The Breakout Room heard, asked questions and made comment:

- In response to a query that was raised regarding the proposed charges for the Museum and Art Gallery but that this did not appear to include the Abington Park Museum, Officers undertook to investigate whether this was an anomaly.
- A similar query was raised regarding the proposal of the charges for Park Rangers fees for activity days and sessions and the two day discount, again Officers undertook to investigate whether this was an anomaly.

Following the Breakout Session for Fees and Charges, Councillor Grant reported back to the Task and Finish Group:

Key points:

- There are 1,500 fees and charges that are estimated to raise revenue of £22 million
- Fees for planning are set in statute
- Building control fees and charges are set against cost recovery. A loss cannot be made, there must be a balanced budget. These fees have not increased for five years
- Others, such as green waste and car parking are set against “what the market can bear”
- The proposal to introduce car parking charges at the Racecourse has been removed from the draft budget
- There is a need to encourage people to use Northampton town centre, especially with the proposal for charging to park for Saturdays and Sundays
- Clarity on the proposed car parking charges at the country parks was provided. The Cabinet Member will look at all suggestions received from the consultation regarding this proposal.
- The Breakout room understood and were supportive of the rationale to increase fees for collection of garden waste. £55 equated to just over £1 per week. It was estimated to generate an increase in revenue of £720,000.
- In response to a query raised about the introduction of a monthly direct debit facility for the charge for green waste collection it was confirmed that this would be investigated however, other Local Authorities that had introduced such a facility had found that a number of residents used the facility for a period of three months then cancelled it.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

Tuesday 31 January 2023

Notes of the Capital Programme Breakout Room

Lead Officer: James Smith – Assistant Director – Finance (Strategy)

Lead Councillor: Cllr Ken Pritchard

Councillors in Attendance: Cllr Ken Pritchard, Cllr Maggie Clubley, Cllr David James, Cllr Jamal Alwahabi

Officers in Attendance: James Smith, Rebecca Peck, Richard Woods

Cabinet Members in Attendance: None

Scope

- To understand the capital programme process
- To receive information on the 30 capital bids referred to in the draft budget and the prioritisation process for this
- To receive details of the fully funded schemes
- To receive details of any capital projects started that are likely to be slipped into 2023-24.

Presentation from James Smith

- Final approved total for 2021-22 Capital Programme amounted to £58.4m
- We had approximately 180 schemes for 2021-22, 167 were inherited from the legacy authorities
- 34 schemes were completed during the period
- Annual capital expenditure in 2021-22 amounted to £59.5m
- The Capital Strategy facilitated the achievement of the Council's corporate priorities, strategic vision and ensuring economic growth in West Northants
- It sets out key objectives and broad principles to be applied by the Council when considering capital investment and its funding
- We prioritise any schemes that help to transform the area and establish West Northants Council's identity as a new authority
- Approval process – senior manages bid as part of the annual budget setting process to include projects in the Council's Capital Programme. Finance collate the bids and calculate the financing cost. ELT and Capital & Assets Board review and assess the bids, all schemes assessed by ELT, the service Portfolio Holder and the Capital & Assets Board in order to be included in the Capital Programme. Full Council then receives the final proposed Capital Programme in February for consideration and approval.
- Once the schemes are input into the Capital Programme, we then have a detailed monitoring process that provided assurance that managers are spending their Capital Budget in line with how it's been allocated.
- Managers provide monthly forecasts to Finance to give confidence that the schemes are still on track with the budget, and timescale. Time slippage is notorious for capital projects therefore this is also monitored and reported on.

- We then take the information on a monthly basis and is then reviewed by ELT and the implication of any overspend or underspend is assessed.
- Quarterly reporting to Cabinet on the above.
- Cabinet may take a specific interest in high value or high profile projects, such as regeneration or highways-related projects.
- During the draft budget stage for 2022-23, many of the capital budget proposals put forward by managers required further work to be viable.
- 2023-24 Draft Budget Summary – the fully funded proposals have been added to the existing approved capital budget for 2023-24 onwards resulting in a draft capital budget for the period between 2023-24 and 2026-27 of £154.8m
- A further 25 schemes with a combined value of £125m over the medium term were submitted.
- Two additional fully funded schemes totalling £1.1m have been added to the budget proposals since the draft budget in December and work has been undertaken to better understand the remaining proposals to ensure that the WNC Capital Programme is affordable and sustainable.
- Since publication of the draft budget, there has been a net increase of £0.5m from existing capital scheme profiles and when adding new proposals, the Capital Programme increases to £191.2m over the four year period to 2027.
- Borrowing is a last resort – we always prioritise schemes that have a degree of either full or partial self-financing.

Presentation from Rebecca Peck

- Net Zero and the link to the Capital Programme
- Sustainability strategy launched last year
- Aim is to be Net Zero on WNC's emissions by 2030
- Aim is also to lead residents and businesses to become Net Zero by 2045
- The definition of Net Zero is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible
- Greenhouse gasses that cannot be eliminated are offset by forestry or technological innovations the remove these emissions from the atmosphere
- Core budget at the moment is £180k and there is also a cross-party working group
- Offsetting emissions will come at a financial cost
- Our aim is to build the quest for Net Zero broadly into the budget and capital programme
- We also are aiming to leverage as much external funding as we can, and we will be part-funding schemes such as the replacement of outdated heating systems at leisure centres with air source heat pumps.
- We are on course to be fully spend for our regional funding, making us one of the only Councils in the region to achieve this.
- A piece of work has been undertaken to link the capital programme to the Council's corporate priorities, which will cost approximately £4m in the 2023-24 budget.
- Net Zero is cross-cutting across all departments of the Council

Conclusions

- Officers commented their view that the Draft Budget for 2023-24 was robust and takes account of potential unforeseen issues and challenges to come.
- It's important that we can stand by our proposals when we take them forward to Cabinet and Council.
- Members commended the efforts of officers in building a balanced budget against the backdrop of severely challenging circumstances

Summary (Main Meeting)

- Cllr Ken Pritchard – Chair of the Capital Programme Group
 - Very good presentation from James regarding how the Capital Approval process works
 - Full explanation of the funded capital projects
 - We also looked at contingencies
 - We looked at overhang from previous financial year, £5m carryover
 - Questions on borrowing - last resort, we always prioritise schemes that have a degree of either full or partial self-financing.
 - The group also looked at Net Zero and how it's interwoven into the Corporate Plan and whether there was a large enough allocation in the budget for it, and whether 2030 was achievable
 - Also, if there was an overspend, assurances were provided on where this would come from.
 - Pipeline projects – lots of feasibility work going on for future applications for levelling up funding.
 - In general, Members were very impressed with the monitoring, oversight and grasp that officers have over capital budget matters.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

31 January 2023

Breakout Room – Adult & Children’s Social Care

Councillors

Councillor Fiona Baker, Lead Member for the Breakout Room

Councillor Sally Beardsworth (Chair)

Councillors Danielle Stone, Rupert Frost and Richard Solesbury-Timms.

Officers

Stuart Lackenby - Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing

Colin Foster - Chief Executive, Northamptonshire Children’s Trust

Andrew Tagg – Director of Finance and Resource, NCT

Gemma Foskett – Group Accountant

Emily Cooledge – Strategic Finance Business Partner

Tony Challinor – Assistant Director Commissioning & Partnerships

Maisie McInnes – Democratic Services Officer

The Breakout Room confirmed that Councillor Sally Beardsworth would chair this Group and would report back the recommendations of the Breakout Room to the main Task and Finish Group.

The Chair introduced the topic for the breakout room and shared they were interested to know what measures were in place for prevention, what was being done to manage costs for delivering the service and meet demand and if WNC were using the private sector and how this was being managed. The Chair invited members to share any questions or concerns. Members shared they wanted to know about how the quality of the service was being maintained, what was being done about the plethora of contracts in adult social care and cost measures.

The Chief Executive NCT and Director of Finance and Resource NCT then delivered a presentation on NCT Budget Scrutiny 2023/24. The Chief Executive shared the ambition statement which captured the aims which were to deliver the best quality services for the best possible price and making efficiencies through targeted investment. The Children’s Trust were keen to address legacy issues which drove additional costs and improve placements sufficiency and the overall process to reduce costs.

He explained the key principles underpinning the budget and emphasised the need to drive efficiencies through improving practice and mitigating placement costs. The Chief Executive then moved on to describe the key achievements of the Northamptonshire Children’s Trust and feedback

from Ofsted received in October 2022 which showed “inspectors are confident in the capacity to further improve” the service.

Key achievements to date

- 1) Delivered 6,000 more placement days using approx. same funds as 2019/20
- 2) Improved quality of social care practice and management oversight, which is helping to keep children safe, as evidenced in Ofsted visits and inspections, peer reviews and internal quality assurance
- 3) More of our social worker posts are filled 15.8% social worker vacancies in June 2022 (England average 17%) compared with 22.28% in October 2019 and no unallocated cases
- 4) Improved working with our partners and a stronger strategic approach to early help; improved early help assessment, step down process and timeliness of support
- 5) An embedded quality assurance framework working alongside practitioners to collaboratively reflect on practice, celebrate good practice and identify learning; which is ‘improving children’s experiences’
- 6) Achieved 100% supporting families PBR grant funds through improving practice 21/22 (previous best 37%)
- 7) Reducing pressures in the system in the context of increasing demand



The key achievements highlighted the trust was successfully recruiting more social workers on permanent basis and had delivered 6000 more placement days using the same funds as in 19/20. The trust was also reducing the number of children with a child protection plan (CPP) as demonstrated in the slides the number of children with a CPP had reduced from 812 to 676 in 2 years, despite the increase in population.

The Chief Executive summarised the financial and performance history of the former Northamptonshire County council and presented the national picture which showed issues with placements, transport and retaining social care staff. He concluded his presentation and invited members to ask questions.

Members asked for more information on care leavers and expressed concern regarding family therapies which were a good preventative tool. The Chief Executive NCT explained the valuing care model did have a therapeutic element, this was removed in the former NCC and has created challenges that the trust faces now. There is also support available to help children have more stable long-term placements. Council support care leavers, could be more creative solutions in terms of housing, active work with property colleagues.

The Director of Finance and Resources added that the Children’s Trust had made substantial developments. He thanked Rebecca Peck and her team for their work with the trust. They were looking into viable options for accommodation and were going to trial using accommodation from the University of Northampton. The Children’s Trust were continuing to grow partnership working and look at ways they can grow provision and ways to prevent exploitation.






Members asked if there was family planning prevention in place for women who had multiple births with children removed from the home. The Chief Executive NCT explained that there were a number of interventions and the Assistant Director Commissioning and Partnerships worked with public health around this. The Pause project in Northampton was an example of good work in this area. The Assistant Director Commissioning and Partnerships added that they were linking initiatives such as 0-

19 contracts (NHFT), family hubs, reducing parental conflict training in conjunction with the Children's Trust.

The Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing then delivered a presentation on Adult Social Care Medium Term Financial Plan 2022/23 – 2026/27.

The Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing gave background to the presentation on the circumstances of local government reorganisation and WNC being a new council during the pandemic. Originally Adults Social Care were expected to support 3483 people, but this increased to 4265 as a result of covid-19 and hospitals not being able to perform medical procedures such as hip replacements in the pandemic. He emphasised that the council had a statutory duty to support residents and ensure there were enough carers available to provide support.

2022/23 Independent care budget £97,724,480

- Demand is levelling off. 
- Original budget build built on 3483 people receiving ongoing support.
- Currently delivering ongoing support to 4265 people. 
- 782 additional people – 22% increase - **£16m pressure.** 
- Real risk around contract inflation 
- Significant risk of increased cost from provider failure 



He celebrated that WNC was the most cost efficient unitary council in the country which was detailed in the table in the presentation.

| Adult Social Care Services | Total LA Budget | Adult Social Care Services | 336 - Support with memory and cognition - adults (18-64) |
|--|-----------------|----------------------------|--|
| West Northamptonshire UA - Total Budget (£k) | £527,524.00 | £113,851.00 | £1,855.00 |
| West Northamptonshire UA - £ per Head | £1,239.19 | £267.44 | £4.36 |
| Average - Unitary Authorities | £1,481.27 | £360.74 | £1.67 |
| West Northants - UA Difference | -£242.08 | -£93.29 | £2.69 |
| West Northants Rank Position (all UAs) | 48 | 58 | 2 |
| Total Authorities Included (UA & budget >£0) | 59 | 59 | 52 |

Impact of H1 programme funded for the first 4 week from National discharge fund

In terms of the 23/24 growth proposals, Adult Social Care had managed to get the budget gap from £16m to £14.5m, and £9.2m of this was pressure from inflation and for the previous 2 years the council did not pass on inflation costs or increase working wages and this budget reflected the 9.7% increase in the national living wage. He explained that there were a few additional grants announced for WNC Adult Social care which included a discharge funding allocation of £1.412m and a market sustainability and improvement fund of £3.406m.

Finally, the Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing shared that in addition to the budget proposals, to maintain robust financial control in this area there were a number of measures put in place such as market oversight meetings which meant that all care packages had to be agreed at one of two weekly meetings. He explained that although this was time intensive it ensured the

appropriate level of care was being commissioned and this delivered value for money. There were also weekly finance and performance meetings with the SLT to track expenditure.

The Chair thanked the team for their informative presentations and attending the meeting.

Members expressed they felt anxious when looking at Adult Social Care and Children's Trust budgets as they were aware the budgets were always overspent as it was a national problem. They asked how the budget was determined and if there was a way of using zero base budgeting. Members asked about the voluntary sector and how this could be made more robust so they could be more supportive in aiding the council to deliver their statutory duties.

The Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing responded that himself and the Chief Executive NCT had the challenge of setting the budget as the behaviour of people and needs of children and adults were not predictable and there was not enough data and trends from Summer and Winter to help the Council. They did have previous NCC data to use but they did not have data to help inform activity, so part of the challenge was moving forward delivering the statutory requirement and continuing to understand growth so they can deliver a balanced budget. He explained that in terms of the voluntary sector what do we define a robust voluntary as? Now there was a plethora of voluntary organisations with so many that focused on a niche area, and this led to organisations competing with one another and it was a case of looking at how the council could encourage them to collaborate in different ways with one another to create sustainability.

Members asked a question regarding zero hours contracts and the Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing explained that the team needed to look at ways to make sure they had enough staff in place for those requiring support and historically zero hours contracts were viewed negatively but in recent trends some individuals preferred this, but zero hours contracts were not viewed favourably by the public. The Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Wellbeing and Health Integration resounded his support for the Executive Director Adults, Communities & Wellbeing for the robustness of the Adult Social care budget and his determination to explore more ideas and ways the council could manage the demand and make more savings and efficiencies and gave his assurance to members as he was reassured by the work that was being done in this area.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions and shared they would be re-joining the main meeting momentarily.

Following the Breakout Session for Adults and Children's Social Care, Councillor Beardsworth reported back to the Task and Finish Group and summarised the above presentations and discussion.

**Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group meeting with the
Leader and Assistant Cabinet Member for Finance**

10 January 2023

Councillors: Cllrs Ian McCord (Chair), Andrew Grant (Vice Chair), Jamal Alwahabi, Sally Beardsworth, Paul Clark, Maggie Clubley, Rupert Frost, Keith Holland-Delamere, Mark Hughes, Koulla Jolley, Ken Pritchard, Azizur Rahman and Danielle Stone

Cabinet Members: Cllr Jonathan Nunn (Leader of the Council) Cllr Kevin Parker (Cabinet Assistant – Finance)

Officers: Martin Henry – Executive Director – Finance (and Chief Finance Officer)
Tracy Tiff – Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Richard Woods – Democratic Services Officer

Overview and Scrutiny Involvement and Engagement

- The Leader of the Council outlined that Budget setting had been extremely difficult this year due to unprecedented challenges beyond the Council's control, namely the cost of living crisis, an increase in demand for services, the cost of purchasing and operating services, a decrease in Covid funding from central Government, and significant inflationary pressures caused by the conflict in Ukraine.
- The Council had reviewed every single penny it spends and receives in order to maximise income and cut down on any unnecessary expenditure, part of this work had been met via the spending restrictions panel, which reviews every single itemised expenditure over £500 across all departments to determine whether it's necessary to delivering the Council's core statutory services.
- A star chamber process had also been undertaken with directors, heads of service and managers in order to identify and maximise possible savings within services.
- Councillor McCord conveyed to the Leader the general consensus among Committee Members was that the scale of the Council's financial deficit was not shared in full with the Committee when the size of the deficit began to become apparent in September 2022. Sharing this information earlier would have led to more transparency and perhaps a more open and coordinated response for all staff and Members to work together to tackle the issues at hand.
- Councillor McCord also added that Cabinet needed to work with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to improve information sharing, so that when challenges arise in the future they do not come as a surprise, this will improve preparedness, collaboration, and resilience of the wider Council along with establishing more trust between the Cabinet and the backbenches.
- Councillor Beardsworth highlighted that, particularly from an Overview and Scrutiny perspective, the Cabinet should look beyond itself and make use of the knowledge and experience of all Members of the Council.
- Councillor Stone added that a strong relationship between Cabinet and the rest of the elected Members could lead to an improvement in the Council's understanding of the impact its decisions make on the local economy, for example, social value in our contracts.
- Martin Henry, the Executive Director – Finance and Section 151 Officer, added that the Procurement Team now enforce social value principles in all of the Council's contract awards.

- Members of the Committee also expressed a desire to receive an overview of the Council's procurement process, which could be delivered by Gus De Silva, Head of Procurement at a future meeting of the Committee.

Draft Budget Consultation Process

- Members requested that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be provided with the details of the interim consultation reports on the Draft Budget for 2023-24 that have already been provided to Cabinet, in order to provide detail on the emerging themes of the consultation.
- As a result of this request, multiple sets of results detailing responses to the interim Draft Budget Consultation have already been shared with the Committee on a strictly confidential basis.
- The purpose of sharing this information with the Committee was to allow Members to understand how the consultation is progressing and for detailed recommendations on the emerging themes to be drawn up as part of the Committee's response to the draft budget proposals.
- Each update incorporates the most up to date position on the consultation.

Corporate Plan, Strategic Vision and Business Intelligence

- In response to how the strategic plan would deliver the Council's commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2030, the Leader of the Council advised that West Northamptonshire Council is now a member of UK100, which is a network of local leaders who have pledged to lead a rapid transition to Net Zero with Clean Air in their communities ahead of the government's legal target.
- The Council will be publishing its energy efficiency report on a regular basis in order to understand our carbon footprint, emissions, and progress towards the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.
- In response to questions from the Committee regarding whether there were any capital projects in progress in order to assist in achieving this goal, the Leader of the Council advised that work was underway to understand how Capital Budgets could be earmarked for such work, however in the immediate future there were plans to add more solar panels to the roof of One Angel Square, and to make the best use of our buildings estate as part of the ongoing office optimisation project.
- Members of the Committee requested that the Leader of the Council set out what the role of the Business Intelligence Team is, and whether the Cabinet is content that the Council is using the Business Intelligence function to its maximum in setting the draft budget for 2023-24.
- In response to this point, the Leader of the Council explained that the Business Intelligence service interacts with all other services Council-wide, in order to pull together performance data to ensure that services are performing well and that identified priorities are being monitored and delivered against.
- The Executive Director – Finance also explained that performance was monitored within services and owned by service directors, and that performance data was also fed into the Executive Programme Board and Executive Leadership Team.
- The Committee also requested further information on the Council's strategic vision regarding transport, in particular collaborative working in relation to home to school transport.

- The Leader of the Council explained that the Home to School Transport service for the whole County was hosted by West Northamptonshire Council and provided to North Northamptonshire Council, however this had recently been disaggregated.
- Home to School Transport currently provided the following services:
 - Home to school transport for pupils of statutory school age (4 – 16 inclusive) under s509 of the Education Act 1996.
 - Pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) of statutory school age
 - Students aged 16-18 in further education and continuing students aged 19 and over
 - Children's Social Care Transport, including respite care transport and family visits
 - Adult Social Care Transport
- A number of different services were dependent on the Home to School Transport Service, which included but were not limited to:
 - Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT)
 - Adult Social Care Service
 - Schools and Colleges
 - Respite Centres
 - Adult day centres
 - Children's Contact Centres
- Following disaggregation, a collaboration agreement was entered into between WNC and NNC to enable support between each team to ensure that expertise from both teams is shared collectively whilst the new teams for West and North establish themselves.