

POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
07/02/2023 at 6.00 pm



Present: Councillor McLaren (Chair)
Councillors Alyas, Barnes, Dean, Harrison, C. Phythian,
Wilkinson and Williamson

Also in Attendance:

Cllr Chris Gloster	Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and Shadow Cabinet Member for Finance and Low Carbon
Andy Cooper	Senior Finance Manager
Cllr Max Woodvine	Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group and the Shadow Cabinet Member for Finance and Low Carbon
Cllr Luke Lancaster	Conservative Member
Chris Kelsall	Assistant Director of Finance
Paul Rogers	Constitutional Services
Anne Ryans	Director of Finance
Mark Stenson	Assistant Director of Finance

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence received.

2 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were declarations of interest.

3 **URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business received.

4 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions received

5 **LIBERAL DEMOCRATS BUDGET AMENDMENT PROPOSALS 2023/24**

Consideration was given to a report outlining the Liberal Democrat Budget Amendment Proposals 2023/24 which presented to the Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Liberal Democrats suggested amendments to the Administration's Budget proposals for 2023/24 and offered some forward-looking proposals to achieve savings in future years.

The Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and Shadow Cabinet Member for Finance and Low Carbon, Councillor Chris Gloster presented the report.

The report identified additional savings totalling £0.921m in 2023/24, £0.942m in 2024/25 and £0.278m in 2025/26 which could be considered individually or collectively. Also identified were initial investments to be funded from the range of savings

proposals put forward to offset the increased expenditure and suggested amendments to the Capital Programme. Details of the proposals can be found in section 3 and in summary at Appendix A to the report. Business Cases for the individual budget reductions can be found at Appendix B to the report.



OPP- BR1-201- Additional Vacancy Management Factor

An assurance was requested that vital services for residents and indeed some of the key professional oriented services of the Council will not be impacted by these proposals taking into account the budget proposals already being put forward.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed the Committee that no negative responses had been received to their proposals as shown on BR1-201. He informed Members that the proposals had been costed and are workable with safeguards. With regard to specific vacancies to deliver the budget reduction, there were numerous vacancies throughout the Council. He referred to Building Control where vacancies meant that agency staff were being utilised which was very expensive.

Reinstate Parish Council Grant Funding - Paragraph 3.14 refers

Given that only a quarter of the Borough falls within the remit of a Parish Council, the disproportionate nature of the investment of £30,000 to assist Parish Councils in their community work was raised. Such investment was considered unfair as some parts of the Borough do not have Parish Councils nor do they have the ability to create a Parish Council.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed Members that the proposal was phased over 2 years and as the Council and Administration are facing financial challenges then it falls on the community and Parish Councils to be responsible for undertaking work that cannot be carried out by this Council.

OPP-BR1-204 – Reduction in Training Budget

A challenge to the proposal was made. It was suggested that the Council, given the particular pressures being faced by all services, needs to invest in the workforce particularly as there will be forthcoming changes to Local Government functions. Therefore, this budget reduction would have a compound effect on an existing reduction in the training budget and will have a negative impact on the workforce and future ability to recruit.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed the Committee that training can, given modern technology, be provided in different ways, e.g., on-line/teams calls and therefore there is scope for further reductions in this area.

OPP-BR1-202/203 - Mileage Budgets/Car Allowances Review



Oldham
Council

Reference was made to the need for a review of car allowances.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed the Committee that there is a projected underspend of £144,000 in this financial year with regard to car allowances and the proposal represents a reduction of one third of that sum. He informed the Committee that a review of Essential Users is necessary to ensure that the right people get the allowance and that there may be scope for further change when the review takes place.

OPP-BR1-206 External Placement Cost Avoidance

Concerns were expressed about this proposal with regard to the need to explore all aspects of bringing an additional 4 children back into the borough. Children had been placed externally because of a need for specific care which cannot be provided in the Borough. Also, in some instances, these placements are made to distance children from problems in the Borough. It might be that the expertise that is available in the External facilities may have to be brought into the Borough in the future resulting in initial additional costs.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed Members that all factors had been taken into account and made reference to the costings shown in BR1-206. He advised that it is an achievable target and pays for itself.

Members were informed that reducing the demand for expert external help by creating internal capacity is currently being proposed in the already approved investment in Children's Social Care.

It was suggested by a Member that as the Administration already has an agreed investment £14.7m in Children's Services including the increased use of foster carers, then the use of foster carers would be a better approach.

Councillor Chris Gloster informed the Committee that there is a shortage of foster carers so there is a need for different types of care, temporary or permanent. Currently this Council uses external units.

Resolved: That the Committee referred the Liberal Democrat revenue and capital budget reduction and investment proposals to Cabinet for consideration mindful of the issues highlighted by the questions/comments raised by the scrutiny process.

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CONSERVATIVE BUDGET AMENDMENT PROPOSALS 2023/24

Consideration was given to a report on the Conservative Budget Amendment Proposals 2023/24 which presented to the

Committee a series of amendments in addition to those proposals already presented by the Administration to the Scrutiny Committee on the 2023/24 Budget.



Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group and the Shadow Cabinet Member for Finance and Low Carbon Councillor Woodvine presented the report.

Councillor Woodvine advised that the report proposed, for the second consecutive year, a freeze in Council Tax for General Purposes. He also advised that while the Conservatives in Opposition do support spending on Adult Social Care across the Borough, they do not support some of the Administration's policy priorities.

The proposed amendments to the Administration's 2023/24 Budget contained in this Report take into consideration the international situations such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, the United Kingdom's (U.K.) withdrawal from the European Union (EU), and the Covid-19 pandemic that have made the financial situation for all Local Authorities worse than in previous times. While the Conservative Group understood and appreciated the difficulties so many Councils are facing, financially, they do believe further economies could be made in Oldham.

The Conservative Group also believes the generous Local Government settlement set out by the U.K. Government in Westminster had improved the financial situation very positively. In addition, thanks to the investment from His Majesty's Government in the form of the Household Support Fund Grant and the Council Tax Support Fund, which have eased the burden for families and individuals experiencing cost-of-living pressures, the Conservative Group proposes to replenish reserves by discontinuing the Administration's plans to replicate the same service covered by these grants.

Also taken into consideration during the production of the proposed amendments in the report are the parameters in which Oldham Council have to work within. That is, direction set by His Majesty's Government, in policy areas such as Education, and the strategic oversight of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority across the Metropolitan County. The main purpose of the proposals in the report ensure that the people living in Oldham do not have to pay a penny more as they compete with the pressures of the cost-of-living situation. The priority of the Conservative Group at this time is to keep taxation at the lowest possible level.

The proposals, while making further Budget reductions, do not directly impact any of the Council's statutory services and residents should not feel any direct result of them – that has been the priority of the Conservative Group. The Conservatives in Opposition are retaining resource in statutory services, which residents expect to be delivered well, but asking this Council to feel the pinch for itself and giving residents much-needed relief in freezing Council Tax in these inflationary times.

The Conservative Group consider this is achievable through significant savings proposals identified within two years which will reduce the Council's base budget requirement by over £3m on an annual basis (of which £2.748m will be delivered in 2023/24). This includes a partial reversal of the Administration's response to the cost of living pressures, which will save some £1.290m in 2023/24. These savings will enable a reduction in the ruling Administration's proposed use of reserves of some £0.662m in 2023/24 (and a further £0.345m in 2024/25). This increased financial resilience can be used to reduce Council Tax increases in future years.

OPP-BR1-302- Discontinuation of District Partnerships

In response to a question, Councillor Woodvine, informed the Committee that this was expenditure which is currently spent on staff and is considered to be an ineffective use of Council money. He made reference to details of the proposal at paragraphs 3.11 – 3.15 in the report. He felt that Councillors should take over the direct responsibility to carry out the work of the District Partnerships and this would prove better value for money. In presenting this budget proposal, the Conservatives did not believe it would have an adverse impact on the community.

One Member felt that whilst they agreed in part with the proposals there was an element where responses to individuals would be impacted by the abolition of all District Partnership working.

A Member suggested that removing Ward Councillor budgets will have a negative impact on small projects which Councillors would support to the extent that the projects would not be possible in the future.

Members were reminded that the Council has moved into Place Based Working and the District Partnerships, in particular, with the coordinator are essential to take forward the Place Based operating model. It was therefore considered that this will save the Council a significant amount of money in bringing services together locally and by those services being integrated. Reference was made to the Youth Involvement Officer who has brought in significant external funds by working with Councillors and assisted the voluntary sector prepare funding bids. These would all be lost. How would these funds be replaced?

Councillor Woodvine responded and informed the Committee that the Conservatives do not believe the District Partnerships are effective and the £1.6m is a straightforward way of economising.

The Chair requested detail of how the District Partnership functions will be allocated amongst the workforce. He was of the view that if volunteer groups are utilised, they will need support in delivering projects and how will that be addressed?

Councillor Woodvine informed Members that the Conservatives see the primary functions as Case Work and Coordination. Case Work can be done by direct liaison between elected Members and staff in respective Directorates. Elected Members will work in all areas including doing case work and coordination. Voluntary Groups will not have these responsibilities.

OPP-BR1-301 Reduction in Executive Management costs through deletion of posts

Concern was expressed at this proposal. A Member asked whether a workload study been carried out and how would the work that these officers undertake be allocated including the delivery of Strategic Change?

Councillor Woodvine informed the Committee that the work would be allocated to the Directors. There would be no reduction in the accountability as this would be taken on at Director level and Directors would be accountable to the Chief Executive. No workload assessment had been undertaken at this stage.

Freezing Council Tax

A Member suggested that freezing Council Tax will have a negative impact on some Statutory and some Non-Statutory services which are necessary for the people of Oldham. Vulnerable people need direct support, people need the support of the Welfare Rights Service which will be impacted.

Part of the recent national finance settlement and the Government expectation that Council Tax increases would be maximised was highlighted by a Member.

In response, the point was made that whilst Council Tax increase maximisation maybe national government policy, the proposal was a local decision.

The Committee was informed that the Council Tax freeze for General Purposes will help people keep more of their income and give some financial benefit in the light of the cost of living pressures. The freeze would be for one year after which it would be reviewed. It was emphasised that the Conservative reductions are in addition to the proposals which have already been suggested by the Administration which will impact on the community.

Cost of Living Initiative

A Member asked, when referring to the provision of some elements of the Cost of Living Initiative while it's being wound down, which aspects of the scheme would this money support and how would the priorities be determined?

Councillor Woodvine informed the Committee that the elements to be continued were those aspects that have already been

committed by the Administration. The whole initiative would be ceased in the next financial year.

A Member highlighted that the current £3m initiative is to help people in the economic crisis and a significant number of people have benefitted substantially from this. It was suggested that by proceeding with the proposal to freeze Council Tax, it would benefit people around 10-20p a week.

Councillor Woodvine informed the Committee that all householders would have more money in their pockets without the Council Tax increase. £3m will not tackle the cost of living problems completely. He believed that £3m is targeted ineffectively.

Resolved: That the Committee did not accept the Conservative Party budget reduction proposals and did not commend them to Cabinet.

7 **POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23**

The Committee considered its Work Programme for 2022/23.

Resolved:

That the Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2022/23 be noted.

8 **KEY DECISION DOCUMENT**

The Committee reviewed the Key Decision Notice which provided an opportunity for the identification of items or policy or service developments, not otherwise listed on the Committee Work Programme.

Resolved:

That the report and the Key Decision Notice be noted.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.20 pm