

BUDGET TASK GROUP

3 November 2022 at 2pm (Remote Meeting)

NOTES

Attendees: Nick Darby (Chairman) – Resources & Performance Select Committee
 David Lewis – Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources
 Will Forster – Resources and Performance Select Committee
 Bob Hughes – Resources and Performance Select Committee
 Jeremy Webster – Children, Families, Lifelong Learning & Culture Select
 John O'Reilly – Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee
 Robert Evans – Adults and Health Select Committee
 Buddhi Weerasinghe – Adults and Health Select Committee

Officers: Bernadette Beckett, Chief of Staff
 William House, Strategic Finance Business Partner
 Kunwar Khan, Scrutiny Officer
 Laila Laird, Democratic Services Assistant
 Louise Lawson, Strategic Finance Business Partner
 Lucy Monie, Director of Highways and Transport
 Nikki O'Connor, Strategic Finance Business Partner
 Joe Osborne, Strategy Officer
 Tony Orzieri, Strategic Finance Business Partner
 Ross Pike, Scrutiny Business Manager
 Daniel Peattie, Strategic Finance Business Partner
 Michael Smith, Programme Director, Twin Track
 Rachael Wardell, Executive Director for Children Families and Lifelong Learning
 Adam Whittaker, Senior Strategy and Policy Lead

Apologies: Liz Bowes - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning & Culture Select Committee
 Jonathan Hulley – Resources and Performance Select Committee

The following key points were raised during the discussion of the Budget Task Group meeting on 3 November 2022:

Home to School Transport**Key points arising from the discussion:**

1. Jeremy Webster asked if there were adequate levels of staffing to conduct the review of 9,000 transport arrangements and queried how long the process would take. Michael Smith explained that an additional eight full time equivalent members of staff had been employed on a fixed term basis to specifically review each case which was expected to take 12 months and finish in June or July 2023.
2. Jeremy Webster asked for clarification around the term 'staffing structures' Rachael Wardell said that the term focused on the redesign within the travel assistance service that took place two years ago. The administrative team responsible for processing Home to School travel applications and the commissioning team had been brought together but the full benefits of this have yet to be realised as separate cultures and behaviours have remained.
3. Jeremy Webster asked how the improvement in overall communications will be undertaken. Michael Smith said that the aim was to streamline and improve the process by identifying challenges through a map of key points in time and the departments

involved in the customer journey. This work included the support of the Digital Design team.

4. Jeremy Webster queried the challenges involved in moving towards the Independent Travel Allowance target (ITA). Michael Smith said that systematically working through service users to identify those appropriate for an ITA and the communication of this was challenging from a finance perspective however the increase in numbers of the team would be beneficial in this process. Rachael Wardell noted a policy decision amendment currently taking place around bursaries to include return journeys required by accompanying parents, not just the one-way journey to school. This policy adjustment would result in an increase in the cost of travel assistance but would cost considerably less than the child being placed on a taxi route. Rachael Wardell noted a second challenge in considering every current child traveller and adjusting their offer, however supporting parents to take their children to school for every new application for travel assistance would change expectation for the better over time.
5. Bob Hughes asked why the decision to review offers made to children was made at such a late stage and sought reassurances that this would not be repeated. Rachael Wardell confirmed that a set of policy changes had resulted in the review of travel arrangements for some children because they were no longer entitled to travel. The timing of these policy changes impacted on the transport provision the following year and this would be avoided in future. In addition to the policy changes, challenges arose from contractors refusing routes and an unusually high level of in year applications.
6. John O'Reilly, in referring to the £57 million draft budget for 2023/24, noted that efficiencies of £4.6 million were anticipated as a result of the Home to School Travel Assistance improvement policy changes and asked for clarification around where the savings were in the budget. Daniel Peattie said that the £57 million is the current assumption of next year's growth less currently identified efficiencies. The roll forward into 2023/24 of the 2022/23 projected overspend of £15 million plus inflation and the expected growth in terms of children with new EHCPs offset by the expected efficiency. A clearer picture of the level of spend for the current academic year would be available soon with the potential for these projections to change. Michael Smith added that there was the potential for the cross cutting, discovery and sufficiency strategy work presented to support this position, however, the current focus remained on the medium to long term to maximise cost reduction in this area.
7. John O'Reilly asked when a more robust budget figure could be expected. Nikki O'Connor confirmed the draft budget would go to Cabinet at the end of November 2022, the final budget would be completed towards the end of December 2022, once the Local Government Settlement was announced and would be considered by Cabinet in January 2023 and Full Council in February.
8. Will Forster noted that to clear the backlog, some routes had been commissioned at higher cost than anticipated and queried how long the higher rates would remain for.
9. Will Forster asked what the impact had been for service users involved in the in-year review. Rachael Wardell explained that it had been routine for routes to last a year however, greater volatility had been experienced since the pandemic resulting in contractors giving back routes in year due to fuel costs and driver shortages. Will Forster asked if a review of the market could be expected. Rachael Wardell confirmed that both the Council and contractors could choose to review but if the Council were to challenge a provider there was a risk of losing the provision completely.
10. Will Forster, in referring to slide six asked why the review of all groups against the new policy had not already been done. Michael Smith said that the volume of reviews had

affected timings but confirmed that reviews would continue to take place systematically until June or July 2023.

11. Will Forster queried why the new policy and routes were not in place from September as opposed to in year. Rachael Wardell said that where the new policy was being applied to new applications, and those applications were received early enough in the year, routes were put in place in time for September. The review of existing arrangements against the new policy was taking time to work through and in addition, in every year there would be applications for transport made after the deadline and during the academic year. These children would need to be added to routes as their applications were received and as the use of solo taxis was being avoided wherever possible (it is good for children's independence and lower in cost) these children were being added to bus routes, meaning that bus routes are having to be changed.

Adult Social Care

Key points arising from the discussion:

1. Jeremy Webster asked what was meant by the term 'front door redesigning.' Will House explained that the term referred to the first contact point from residents to the Council for assessment or information. The work was to focus on the entire process, ensuring consistency however the first point of contact is made.
2. Jeremy Webster asked for clarification around the review of older peoples in house services. Will House explained that this referred to the decision in February 2022 to close eight care homes operated by SCC and the programme around these closures.
3. Will Forster, in noting that most efficiencies were amber rated, asked what assessment had been conducted to determine how successful these efficiencies would be. Will House said that the ratings reflected the current challenging environment and recognised that the efficiencies were achievable but challenging.
4. Will Forster highlighted the Budget Task Group's concern at the number of amber rated efficiencies within Adult Social Care and the clear indications that the Adult Social Care budget may not work with these amber rated risks. Michael Smith undertook to feed the Group's concerns back to relevant senior officers. Nikki O'Connor added that it was not unusual to have more amber and red ratings at this stage of the budget setting process because the efficiencies were at the initial stages of planning and development.

Children, Families, Lifelong Learning & Culture

Key points arising from the discussion:

1. Jeremy Webster asked for clarification around Impower. Rachael Wardell said that sensible proposals had been received from Impower to improve work with children and their families. In addition, rigour had been created around forecasting the trajectories of young people through different services and costs.

Environment, Transport & Infrastructure

Key points arising from the discussion:

2. Jeremy Webster asked for more information around the waste contractor situation. Lucy Monie explained a high level of commercial sensitivity regarding this matter.

John O'Reilly committed to arrange an update going forward. **Action – John O'Reilly.**

Wider Questions about annexes and other areas:

1. Nick Darby asked what had been included in the budget for Land and Property repairs costs. Louise Lawson committed to provide reactive maintenance budget information outside of the meeting. **Action – Louise Lawson**

These notes would be circulated to the Resources and Performance Committee.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING: 3 July 2023 at 2:00pm