

Budget Scrutiny: Response to recommendations to Cabinet

1. In support of the 2025/26 budget process steps were taken to enhance the associated Overview and Scrutiny arrangements. This included during September Directorate Budget Awareness sessions and during October/November task & finish working groups to explore key lines of enquiry within their area of responsibility. The areas considered in further detail were as follow.
 - **Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
 - School Transport costs
 - Care growth forecast
 - **Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
 - Demand Management (Adult Social Care)
 - **Environmental and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
 - Climate & ecological emergency budget including costs associated with reaching net zero ambitions
 - Bed and breakfast costs and temporary accommodation
 - **Overview and Scrutiny Board**
 - Car Parking Charges
 - Residents card
2. Following the task and finish groups a series of recommendations were made to the Overview and Scrutiny Board. These recommendations fell into 3 categories.
 - a) Recommendations to Cabinet on budget matters.
 - b) Recommendations to Cabinet on matters not specifically related to the budget.
 - c) Recommendations from the Overview & Scrutiny Board to other Overview & Scrutiny Committees.
3. Regarding (a) the recommendations to Cabinet on budget matters, these with the responses of the relevant Portfolio Holder as set out below.

Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Education & Skills: Cllr R Burton

- 1) Supports and promotes inclusion as a key priority for Children's Services enabling more SEND pupils to be educated in mainstream, local schools, therefore reducing the need for school transport provision and associated costs.

Response: BCP Council has inclusion and belonging as one of its highest priorities. BCP new co-produced Belonging Strategy will be launched as part of a suite of strategies before Christmas that emphasises the importance of children and young people having that sense of belonging in their school setting and the impact that has on their outcomes. We will be working with schools on a new Information Sharing Agreement to enable transparent and open sharing of school level data in relation to exclusions, suspensions, attendance to support the discussion around inclusive practices.

Alongside this, the final proposals for the use of the £2.8 million Inclusion Innovation fund will be discussed at Schools Forum in January 2025. Once approved this will create increased capacity for BCP to support and challenge mainstream schools with their systemic practices and approaches to inclusion. Inclusion Consultants (ICONS) will be assigned to schools and will provide support, guidance and challenge to their schools in relation to their SEND systems in school and how they provide support to their pupils. This fund will also provide further training to schools and increase the specialist offer of Outreach Support and BOOST training from our special schools, to provide further expert support and guidance to our mainstream settings on how to support their pupils. Finally, it will also offer schools the opportunity to bid for Innovation funding to enable them to put further support in place in their own setting for their cohorts of children with SEND. Schools will be invited to bid for this funding once the fund has been signed off by Schools Forum.

- 2) Be informed that the O&S working group notes that the Children's Social Care Service is working within the MTFP and is assured that the budget for 2025/26 is being built on well informed growth forecasts and that BCP's position was now stabilising in terms of numbers of children entering the care system.

Response: Whilst the numbers of children in care are stabilising there are still pressures in the cost of placements and the complexity of the needs of children. National demands for placements out strips supply which can leave us at the mercy of the private provider market.

We have a Sufficiency Statement and action plan which going forward will be overseen by a Sufficiency/ Commissioning Board. Part of this work is to manage the market to gain placement capacity at lower cost. We work hard to keep families at home and have a clear early help system that supports this agenda. We seek to place children in family environments and positively have a significant number of children in fostering placements, which is of lower cost and better for the outcomes for the children.

- 3) Notes that, within a time of financial constraint, the O&S working group finds that protection of non-statutory services (such as Early Help) continues to be vitally important to avoid additional financial impact on statutory services. The working group supports and recommends a continued approach to protecting non-statutory services for this reason.

Response: We welcome this support and recommendation. We are successful at keeping families together through our Keeping Families Together team and have a robust an early help system which provides multiagency support within communities to be able to support families early reducing the need for statutory intervention. The impact of this can be seen in the lower rated of re referrals into the system.

- 4) Be informed that the O&S working group was assured by the previous end of year outturn being within approximately £300k of the Quarter 3 projections for the year, which was a minimal variance, demonstrating that the Service has a good handle on the anticipated costs for Children's Services.

Response: We work hard to identify areas of cost management and are diligent in our management oversight of cost pressures and mitigations to manage them. Such as seeking permanent staffing, developing system changes such as Early Help and Keeping families together to drive down demand as well as reviewing our commissioning arrangements and relationships with providers.

Portfolio Holder for Health & Wellbeing: Cllr D Brown

- 5) That in light of the financial and other benefits of block booking beds, funds be made available in the 2025/26 budget to allow the Adult Social Care service to increase the number of block booked beds used by the council for long-term care provision with the aim of reaching 300 block booked beds, followed by a review and a further aim of 500 block booked beds.

Response: Commissioning commenced a work programme to secure 300 block booked beds during the year. We have secured 157. For the remaining 143 we aim to achieve this by converting 143 already spot purchased beds to block booked beds. Once we have secured 300 block booked beds, we will review our position and consider if we should commission a further 200 at the point of review.

- 6) That funds be made available in the 2025/26 budget to support the Adult Social Care service to work in partnership with health partners to develop a more enhanced offer of intermediate care and reablement care to be able to meet the objective of reducing or delaying long-term residential care need for residents.

Response: Under the Urgent Emergency Care (UEC) programme of work with all partners and Newton, there is a specific workstream that is focussed on intermediate care and reablement. This work is focussed on an enhanced offer of intermediate care and reablement and ensuring that those individuals who require a recovery approach are given access to it. This is a system wide approach to intermediate care and reablement throughout the Dorset footprint.

Portfolio Holder for Climate Response, Environment and Energy: Cllr A Hadley

- 7) Put in place as a matter of urgency a corporate approach to financial decision making that would enable it to meet its net zero targets by 2030, to include a gap analysis of the estimated total amount of spend required to reach net zero targets against the work already underway within departments to reach these targets.

Response:

Progress towards net zero across the operations of the Council by 2030 will require significant focus on this ambition across all services. A clear plan of action will be produced during 2025, highlighting the interim steps towards the target.

In addition to this we will require invest to save business cases and making use of any grant funding opportunities where applicable. The council will need to be ready to make strategic investment decisions, including a gap analysis and a review of its Net Zero pipeline. A focus group will be set up to take this action forward.

- 8) Following receipt of the Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) report and the work suggested at recommendation 7 above, Cabinet be recommended to consider a mechanism for including the full costs associated with reaching net zero by 2030 alongside the Medium-Term Financial Plan, by consulting best practice used in other authorities to date for the same purpose.

Response:

The LAEP plan will identify 15 key actions, these actions have been agreed through a series of workshops with key stakeholders, the final report will be available in February 2025.

A key output from this study will be the commercial business cases that support the 15 key actions, this will need to be considered alongside our 2030 target, budget position and baked into our MTFP. An assessment of the targets, costs and barriers across all priorities, given the constraints of the Medium-Term Financial Plan will be produced.

Portfolio Holder for Housing and Regulatory Services: Cllr K Wilson

- 9) That Cabinet notes that the O&S working group members are assured that, within the difficult financial position that the council is in, officers have explored options to maximise budget and to change the direction of travel in relation to temporary accommodation.

Response: I am grateful that the members feel assured that we have explored options to maximise budget, and we have certainly been able to change the direction of travel in the cost and quality of the Temporary Accommodation used by significantly reducing our use of B&B accommodation by circa 90% with further progress to be made. Not only has this made a significant difference to the budget, but more importantly to the lives of those who were living in B&Bs, which is the most challenging accommodation to thrive in.

- 10) That the O&S working group members record their concern at the level of Homelessness Prevention Grant and the government subsidy for temporary accommodation placements and request that the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Regulatory Services explore all possible mechanisms to lobby government for increases in this respect.

Response: I am more than happy to take this recommendation on board. Since the initial recommendation, we have had £2.68m 24/25 rising to £4.2m 25/26 with specific new ringfenced conditions. Plus, the £210k families grant. Other grants largely unchanged with some consolidation. This is a welcome allocation, and it is due largely to our position nationally in the area as a Local Authority of best practice. Both myself and The Leader raise housing issues regularly with MPs in meetings. Happy to explore further mechanisms to lobby, on all aspects of housing that can help reduce homelessness.

Portfolio Holder for Destination, Leisure & Commercial Operations: Cllr R Herrett

- 11) That the principle of an inflationary increase across all parking charges be endorsed for the 2025/26 budget.

Response: Cabinet approved an inflationary increase in all fees and charges across the council for the 2025/26 financial year, Officers are currently drafting figures for approval. It should be noted that cost inflation solely within the parking departments budget, will outstrip the nominal RPI figure, in fact the governments assumption when calculating 'covering the councils NI increase are based on 'commercial' aspects of the council operating on full cost recovery. This would mean any increase based solely on RPI or CPI, would mean a reduction in overall income to the council.

- 12) That Cabinet requests Officers to take into account the suggestion that an assessment be made on using a proportion of surplus income to accelerate the parking charging machine replacement programme prioritising the best value machines in order to reduce future costs (subject to the necessary procurement processes).

Response: Officers are already working on such a programme and will consider an accelerated timeline where appropriate.

It should be noted that with an inflation only rise, income will already be outstripped by rising costs.

- 13) That Officers be requested to explore options to reduce costs for the Council and make the process easier for the public to pay for car parking, in particular an option to be able to pay in advance/on Council website.

Response: As part of the Parking Strategy that is being formed, stakeholders (including the public that use our parking places) will be asked for their opinions on a wide variety of parking matters including preferred payment methods. Easier means many things to many different people, and that will be considered.

- 14) That there should be an application process for the Resident's Card with a small financial contribution for the cost of processing and that the card should be a valuable offer that residents are willing to pay a small cost for, so that it can be sustainable in terms of administrative costs.

Response: Noted and will be considered as we work toward finalising the residents card programme.

- 15) That any charge levied for the Resident's Card should be the same regardless of the format and that consideration should be given to concessions for disadvantaged groups.

Response: Noted, as part of the EIA this will be given full consideration.