



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Budget Scrutiny Task Group

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Budget Scrutiny Task Group** held on **Tuesday 21 November, 2023**, 18th Floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

**Members Present:** Councillors Paul Fisher (Chair), Lorraine Dean, Tim Mitchell, Ellie Ormsby, Angela Piddock, Ian Rowley and Jason Williams.

**Also Present:** Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director of Finance and Resources), Jake Bacchus (Director of Finance), Jessica Barnett (Corporate Governance Support Officer), Councillor Nafsika Butler-Thalassis (Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Public Health and Voluntary Sector), Bernie Flaherty (Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Public Health), Lyndsey Gamble (Head of Strategic Finance), Amit Mehta (Strategic Finance Manager Bi-Borough Children's Services), Sarah Newman (Bi-Borough Executive Director for Children's Services), Zohaib Nizami (SFM Adults and Public Health and Corporate Finance), Clare O'Keefe (Lead Policy and Scrutiny Advisor), Anna Raleigh (Director of Public Health), Councillor Tim Roca (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Young People, Learning and Leisure), Visva Sathasivam (Bi-Borough Director of Social Care) and Anita Stokes (Lead Strategic Finance Manager Children's).

#### 1 WELCOME

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed those present to the Budget Scrutiny Task Group (BSTG) meeting.
- 1.2 The Chair gave an overview of the changes made to the BSTG process including the attendance of Cabinet Members for which the Chair gave thanks for their engagement with the new process as their attendance had not been standard practice in the past.
- 1.3 The BSTG noted that Councillor Mendoza had sent apologies and Councillor Rowley was present as substitute.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

### **3 MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN**

- 3.1 Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director of Finance and Resources) introduced the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) report to the BSTG and provided an overview of the 2024/25 draft Budget, including the current Revenue Budget position and the Capital Programme.
- 3.2 The BSTG was informed that the two most significant pressures facing the Council were the increasing cost of temporary accommodation (TA) and additional interest rates. The BSTG noted that there would be an opportunity for TA to be discussed in greater detail at the next BSTG meeting, on Thursday 23 November, where Housing Services would be covered. The BSTG also noted that the current increase in interest rates would help to partially offset the TA pressure in the short term but not over the longer term given that interest rates were expected to reduce.
- 3.3 The BSTG understood that the current draft Budget position did not include outcomes from the Autumn Statement or the Local Government Finance Settlement due to be announced in December.
- 3.4 BSTG Members queried:
- Whether there was a need for a thorough review on TA pressures and it was suggested this could be by a separate Task Group of the relevant Policy and Scrutiny Committee.
  - The potential to examine TA pressures in co-operation with other councils.
  - The potential range estimates for interest earnings, particularly around budget gaps.
  - Whether there could be more clarity on differential inflation rates for different service areas, including how this is applied to the Budget, the Capital Programme and different service areas across the Council.
  - The Fairer Westminster Strategy and the efficiencies behind delivering some of the new ideas including participatory budgeting and the potential impact of certain areas on budget pressures elsewhere.
  - What the £28m assigned to compliance and contractual obligations included and whether it was a regulatory burden.
  - How the MTFP budget gap and Capital Programmes would be scrutinised during the budget scrutiny process and at what stage.
  - Whether the increase in reserve funding figures from the last Budget would come from general reserves or earmarked reserves.

#### **ACTION**

- 3.5 That clarity will be provided on inflation rate differentiation, including what is applied to the draft Budget, Capital Programme and different service areas.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.6 The establishment of a Task Group to investigate Temporary Accommodation should be considered by the Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee.

#### **4. Children's Services 2024/25 draft Budget**

4.1 Councillor Tim Roca (Cabinet Member for Young People, Learning and Leisure) provided an introduction to the Children's Services 2024/25 draft Budget, supported by Sarah Newman (Bi-Borough Executive Director for Children's Services). BSTG Members noted that the Children's Service was operating in an environment of ever-increasing pressures, both financially and post-COVID-19 with more complex cases which were reflected in the figures seen in the report. The BSTG was informed that there had been an uplift in the budget from certain items related to Fairer Westminster objectives, such as free school lunches.

4.2 BSTG Members queried:

- The impact that the proposed savings would have on school children and their ability to access alternative provisions.
- Whether there was scope for the personal transport budget to be expanded for use beyond Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) children, whether a trend in increased usage had been identified and if this has resulted in a saving on other transport.
- The frequency of use of the personal transport budget and independent travel in other boroughs and whether it was growing in popularity.
- How the Council gathers and analyses feedback on the use of the personal transport budget and independent travel.
- Reasons behind SEND transport featuring in both savings and pressures.
- Whether the repurposing of accommodation for care leavers was an 'invest to save' endeavour, how the accommodation is being made to be fit for purpose and the location of the accommodation.
- The definition of reconfiguring fostering and what it meant in practice and whether withdrawing from the current tri-borough arrangement would result in a saving.
- With the increasing demand in statutory services, increasing costs of looked after children and care leavers and given the savings to Council has to make over the next three years assurance was sought that the services looking after vulnerable children will be protected.
- Whether universal provision of free school meals would continue without cuts to SEND provision as well as the three family hubs to fund this.
- Assurance that SEND provision is being given the focus it should be given.
- Reasons as to why the investment in the registrars' booking system was not reflected in further additional income at this stage, whether this would lead to income in the future and if a discount is provided to residents.
- Request for a systematic risk rating on the savings proposals and a more granular analysis of the risks.
- When places would be available at Edward Wilson for SEND children, and when.

- Whether the school inclusion programme would be across the City, whether the team would be expanded and what sort of things are funded in the programme.
- Whether the roll out of trauma-based training in schools would reduce children and young people being placed in care.
- Reasons behind the Department of Education recommended social care officer for SEND not being funded by national government and whether the council is lobbying on this.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.3 That analysis of the risks (i.e. a RAG rating) will be included in future rounds of BSTG papers, particularly on savings proposals.

## **5. Adult Social Care and Public Health 2024/25 draft Budget**

- 5.1 Councillor Nafsika Butler-Thalassis (Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Public Health and Voluntary Sector) provided an introduction to the Adult Social Care and Public Health 2024/25 draft Budget, supported by Bernie Flaherty (Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Public Health).

- 5.2 The BSTG was informed that although the Adult Social Care budget was £107m, the net controllable budget was £54m with efficiency savings proposed at £2.35m with £0.86m already agreed. The BSTG noted that two investments totalling £1.275m were proposed to support care workers pay and to provide hot meals to service users. The BTSG also noted that local impact key issues include; a need for the integrated care board to reduce overheads by 30-40 percent and that the impact on the Council was currently unknown; the Better Care Fund review; existing service users who leave the system being replaced by new users with more complex needs and that the Council is seeing an 11 percent increase in adults entering adult social care than had been seen in the last five to six years; more scrutiny in local government of the adult social care service with more grants coming in and ensuring these were being used to support the rise in adult social care users. The BTSG was informed of ten savings proposed for the Adult Social Care service.

- 5.3 Members queried:

- Whether the RAG rating could be more explicit to more easily determine risk areas.
- The increasing demand from those with complex needs and the Learning Disabled transitions pressure.
- The laudable home care workers pay increase, funded by the Market Sustainability Fund for two years, and assurance that further cuts would not be made to Learning Disabled supported living to fund this after those two years and diminish quality of services.
- Whether there was an opportunity for more than 10 nominations per year for housing for those with disabilities and mobility issues.

- Whether the EQIA showed no identified impact on service users and was only about efficiencies.
- Whether the retendering of the occupational therapy contract would have an impact on cuts to other services.
- The cost effectiveness and reach of the hot meals provision pilot and the definition of the eligible cohort for this service.
- Whether there were opportunities to identify other contracts that could be brought in-house.
- Use of the digital account to diversify spend beyond the hours of care to more outcome-specific activities.
- Cost benefit analysis of staffing pressures that may occur due to increased digitisation, the responsibility for the digitisation agenda and the risks associated with increased Council-managed digital systems.

### **ACTIONS**

- 5.4 That more information and examples will be provided for what is included in the Digital Account as well as what has been put in place to mitigate against potential vulnerabilities in Council-managed digital systems.

The meeting ended at 19:54.

**CHAIR:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_