

BUDGET AND FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Budget and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 1st February 2012 at 6.30pm in the Scrutiny Meeting Room, Civic Offices, Telford

PRESENT: Councillors R. Sloan (Chairman), K. Austin, A. Lawrence, C. Mollett, A. Stanton, C. Turley and R. Williams (Co-optee).

Also attending: Cllr. A. McClements; J. Gulliver, Scrutiny Co-optee; K. Perry, Head of Safeguarding; Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Group Specialist.

BFSC-34 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Budget and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on 24th January 2012 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

BFSC-35 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs. R. Evans, S. Reynolds.

BFSC-36 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs. R. Evans and C. Mollett declared an interest as Ironbridge Parking Permit holders.

BFSC-37 SERVICE & FINANCIAL PLANNING STRATEGY 2012/13-2014/15

The main purpose of the meeting was for the Committee to agree its response to the budget proposals, but first received further information requested at the meeting on 5th January regarding the costs of children in care placements. The Head of Safeguarding gave a presentation referring to tabled documents. The documents showed budgeted and actual expenditure for looked after children placements between 2007/08 and 2011/12, the numbers of children by care placements and information on investment in children in care placements.

The upward trajectory was due to an increase in the number of children and complex cases coming into care, although the latest figures for January had shown that the number of children in care, and usage of agency foster carers, had reduced.

Following the presentation a number of points were discussed:

- Members asked whether the increase in the number of children coming into care following Baby P was due to risk aversion by social workers. The Head of

Safeguarding replied that the increase was more due to greater awareness and sophistication in recognising potential harm.

- A question about the pipeline of foster carers was raised. The number of internal foster carers had increased in proportion to a reduction of external foster carers. The target of 14 new foster carers had been exceeded.
- Members acknowledged that it was difficult to budget for care placements because the numbers coming into care and the complexity of need was uncontrolled, but that there was a need to ensure that care was provided in the most cost effective way. The Head of Safeguarding replied that the Cohesion Team was responding quickly to problems and was working to prevent admissions, but the authority had a legal duty to find a placement if a child needed one.
- External residential care was the most expensive type of care for children with very complex needs. Members questioned whether alternative models of provision had been fully explored that would enable provision to be delivered locally and at a lower cost, for example small scale provision within the borough or the recruitment of “super” foster carers skilled to deal with complex needs. The Head of Safeguarding replied that there was a group of children for whom fostering and a family set up was not suitable, and who need residential care packages which include specialist support such as education or health care. Regulatory requirements also needed to be considered. With regard to small scale provision in the borough, there was an issue with there being a sufficient critical mass of children within the borough to make this cost-effective.
- Members asked whether there was capacity within Jigsaw to house more children in care. Current provision is 6 residential beds and 5 were occupied. The other houses at Jigsaw were being used. Jigsaw provision was being reviewed to see whether the best use was being made of the provision.

The Chairman remarked that prevention and early intervention were long-term strategies that would take time to have an impact but that he hoped would offer better value for money and outcomes in the long run. The Head of Safeguarding was thanked and left the meeting.

There were no further questions arising from items discussed at the previous meeting. Following the last meeting, members had requested a breakdown of supporting people costs and the unit cost of Meals on Wheels and this information was tabled or provided verbally by the scrutiny officer. Officers from the relevant service areas had not been invited to the meeting to present the information and it was agreed that further discussion was needed on both items. It had been recommended at the previous meeting that the Meals on Wheels service would be referred to the Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee to review, taking the social aspects of the service into account, and subject to agreement by the relevant scrutiny committee members. It was further agreed that the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee would review supporting people from a value for money perspective at a future meeting. Members wanted to explore the cost effectiveness of providing very small amount of support to a large number of people.

A report showing the number of people participating in each method of budget consultation was tabled for information. Members noted the overall number of people who had engaged in the process (approximately 7,442) and commented on the high number of people responding to the “Your Voice” cut out compared to those using social media.

Members discussed the comments that they would like to make in response to the budget proposals. The comments would be presented to the Cabinet on 23rd February so that they could be taken into account before the final proposals are finalised. Members made the following comments to formulate the Committee’s response:

1. The Committee acknowledged the effort that had gone into engaging members of the public in the budget consultation process.
2. Members were concerned about the risk of depending on realising £100m of capital receipts for the investment programme in the current market, and the additional pressure that the cost of any extra borrowing would put on the revenue budget. Members recommend that capital receipts continue to be very closely monitored, and the Committee will continue to monitor this as part of its on-going work.
3. The Committee was mindful that the target of around £2.18m savings from procurement is ambitious and that the savings must continue to be very closely monitored. The Committee will continue to monitor this as part of its on-going work.
4. Members were reassured to hear that that the savings proposals in children and family services that were looked at in more detail (Youth Initiatives, Teen Pregnancy Services, Domestic Violence provision) would be made mainly from efficiency savings and that it was not anticipated that there would be a significant impact on services.
5. If the closure of the CRC in Newport goes ahead, members recommended that a Tetra Pak recycling bank, currently located at the CRC site, should remain in Newport.
6. If CRC facilities are reduced, members of the public must be made aware of which sites are open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays so they do not waste time visiting a CRC which is closed.
7. Members remained sceptical that marketing strategies such as social media aimed at changing the behaviour of households who do not recycle would produce the projected level of savings, and felt that improved recycling rates could only be achieved in conjunction with a review of containers and collection cycles.
8. The Committee was concerned about the consistent overspend on children in care placements and recommended that fresh ideas are sought from outside the

authority to find alternative delivery models to look after children better but for less money, recognising that the children must come first. Members agreed with the early intervention approach, but were concerned whether this would generate the necessary savings in the short term (during 2012/13), and that costs should continue to be closely monitored. The Committee will continue to monitor costs.

9. The Committee emphasised the need to follow due process for consulting on changes to adult social care services – to ensure changes are communicated to service users, that the impact of changes can be mitigated as far as possible and to minimise the risk of challenge/judicial review.
10. Members recognised the work involved in the negotiations with the PCT about the impact on the adult care budget of the withdrawal of CHC funding, and welcome the positive approach of the PCT.
11. The Committee recognised the difficult position facing the Council in making a decision on Council Tax and were mindful of the impact an increase would have on households affected by the recession.
12. Given the significance of the Gorge to the local economy the Committee were hopeful that ongoing negotiations with the government about funding for stability work would produce a positive outcome.
13. The Committee commended the work of the Street Pastors and welcomed the Council's further investment in the project for 2012/13 and hoped that funding would be sustained in future years

Members further agreed further scrutiny work arising from scrutiny of the proposals subject to agreement by the relevant scrutiny committee members:

- The Budget & Finance Budget Scrutiny Committee would continue to monitor savings on procurement, costs of children in care placements and capital receipts.
- The Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee would review Supporting People costs from a value for money perspective at a future meeting.
- The Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee would review proposals relating to changes to the Meals on Wheels service.
- The Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee would review Jigsaw provision as part of the wider review of SEN provision, and the options for the Jigsaw houses.

It was agreed that further comments would be added regarding the challenge of setting the budget in the face of the size of the cuts to the Council's grant settlement, and highlighting the fact that that with the large number of savings proposals it had not been possible for the Committee to carry out a comprehensive review of each proposal; the Committee had therefore focussed on a number of items of particular interest to members. Members also recognised the fact that efforts had been made

to make savings through efficiencies and to minimise the impact on services wherever possible.

RESOLVED that the Committee's response be drafted by the Scrutiny Group Specialist in the terms set out above and circulated to members for comment prior to its presentation to Cabinet.

BFSC-38 FORWARD PLAN

It was agreed that given the number of meetings held in the past month, no meetings would be held in February and that the Committee would reconvene in March to review Supporting People provision. Potential dates would be circulated by the Scrutiny Group Specialist for agreement with members.

The meeting ended at 8.15 p.m.

Chairman:.....

Date:.....