

Section A - Part 1 - Report on findings from Overview and Scrutiny Committees

1. Overview and Scrutiny Committees received the draft revenue and capital proposals in January/February 2023, with feedback considered by Cabinet as part of finalising proposals within this report.

This section summarises the comments and recommendations from each Committee and, where applicable, Cabinet's consideration of these.

2. Scrutiny Overview Committee – 7 February 2023

- 2.1 The Leader introduced the report, providing headline figures, details of investments, efficiencies, cost pressures, and the proposed draft capital programme spending. Portfolio Holders provided a further description of proposals within the remit of the Committee.

An extensive discussion was held on the draft revenue and capital budget proposals, with particular challenge provided in relation to:

- Card payments and online services capital investment schemes – it was suggested that this needed future scrutiny.
- The level of reserves held by the Authority.
- Overspend within the Children's Service and Adults Social Care.
- Increasing cost pressures through rising prices of commodities, fuel and energy.
- Review of provision - school crossing patrols.

- 2.2 Appendix 2 - OP 32, Renting out Civic Centre floor space to partners and Appendix 3 (Capital Scheme) Refurbishment Investment in Civic/Council House.

The Committee considered the future use of the civic centre, including hybrid working arrangements, enhancing the council's registrars offer and the proposal to lease out space within the civic. The Leader clarified that this investment was required to ensure the space was fit for purpose, met health and safety requirements and to ensure that maximum income was achieved from the building from both a service offer and working with partners from a one public estate perspective. Officers clarified that this would be a capital scheme, also supported by a £3.7m capital grant from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme supporting air source heat pumps across the civic centre and Council House to deliver towards the net carbon zero agenda and drive energy efficiency. It would also provide an enhanced service offer for registrars, which would generate additional ongoing revenue benefits, especially from increased marriage ceremonies from a much improved, town centre space. Concern was expressed by the Committee that investment in the civic centre was not prudent at this time.

2.3 Appendix 2 P2 – Expiry of Sandwell and Walsall Citizen advice (CAB) grant funding agreement

The Leader explained the reasons for the reduction in the grant funding provided to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), stating that this was no longer a satisfactory service to Walsall residents. Members debated the merits of the service provided - it was acknowledged that this was previously of significant value to Walsall residents however; it was felt by some Members that this was no longer the case. A recommendation for the full grant of £240,000 to be continued (with conditions of service) was not supported by the majority of the Committee. The Committee further discussed the service provided by the CAB and the benefits of developing an in house service or using an alternative provider and it was suggested that this should be a future agenda item for the Scrutiny Overview Committee.

2.4 The Committee Resolved that:

1. The Scrutiny Overview Committee support recommendation one made by the Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, in relation to the draft revenue and capital programme 2023/24 – 2026/27, at its meeting on 19 January 2023:

(That recommendation being ‘Cabinet be advised that the Committee is unable to support the savings listed in the ‘Summary of Operational Proposals by Outcome 2023/24 – 2026/27’, contained with Appendix 2 (Savings in relation to Social Care).

2. The Scrutiny Overview Committee request that Cabinet produce a full options appraisal on the future use of the Civic Centre before allocating resources to its refurbishment.
3. The Scrutiny Overview Committee ask Cabinet to consider the impact of the financial overspend within Adult Social Care and Children’s Services and that a robust action plan aimed at dealing with the overspend is produced for the next financial year.

3. Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 12 January 2023

- 3.1 The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills gave a brief introduction to the report and highlighted the salient points. He highlighted £4.7m of investment and cost pressures, the saving proposals, and the proposed draft capital programme spending. The Chair then invited the Finance Business Partner for Children’s Services (Access and Inclusion & Admin Hub) who outlined briefly what each attached appendix showed. There was no further discussion on the item.

3.2 The Committee Resolved:

That the Committee noted the draft revenue budget proposals and draft revenue capital schemes.

4. Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 19 January 2023

4.1 Further to a presentation by the Lead Accountant for Adult Social Care and Public Health, Members considered the draft budget proposals in detail. Members raised concern and sought assurances on a number of proposals as set out within the report as follows:-

- Appendix 2 - Operational proposals 2023/24 – 2026/27

Members sought clarification as to how savings would be achieved and (should they be realised) how this would affect the services delivered by the Council.

Officers assured Members that savings could be achieved through improved income generation and early intervention.

- Impact of planned savings of £2.25m in 2023/24

The Committee sought assurance that planned savings of £2.25 million over the financial year 2023/24 would not have a detrimental effect on the welfare and wellbeing of residents who use Council social care services.

Officers informed Members that the proposed savings had been informed by a strength-based approach. This would help the Council to ensure that residents receive the most appropriate level of support, enabling them to maintain as much independence as possible, whilst reducing overdependency on services.

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care emphasized that levels of care provided was set out within the Care Act 2014. The Council was seeking to implement a new way of working which would deliver better care for residents.

- OP15 - 'Income generation review of grants – Section 75 grant',

Members raised concern at the level of debt between the ICB (Integrated Care Board) and the Council.

- Presentation of the budget proposals

The Committee felt that the way in which the report was drafted could lead to confusion as some proposals, listed as savings, were to be achieved by increased income generation.

Officers clarified that some proposals were classed as savings because they were a continuation of income made in the previous financial year. In addition, the Council was in negotiation with partners, such as health, on the delivery of care which could lead to cost recovery which would be included as savings.

Whilst accepting the explanation of both Officers and the Portfolio Holder in relation to the above matters, concern remained at the level of proposed savings. The Committee were unable to support them in their current form.

4.2 The Committee Resolved that:

1. Cabinet be advised that the Committee is unable to support the savings listed in the 'Summary of Operational Proposals by Outcome 2023/24 – 2026/27', contained with Appendix 2.
2. That the draft revenue budget proposals and draft revenue capital scheme be noted.

5. Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 30 January 2023

- 5.1 The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services gave a brief introduction to the report. She highlighted investments, cost pressures, the saving proposals, and the proposed draft capital programme spending. The Chair invited the Lead Accountant (Children's Services) to present the report, who outlined the attached appendices.

Members discussed the overspend position and were assured that this had been taken into account within the budget proposals.

Further detail was sought by the Committee in response to reference 38 – additional Looked after Children demand/cost pressures. The Committee was informed that the investment figure for 2023/24 was higher than that of future years, in order to account/adjust for the current financial position, however this would be reviewed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process to ensure the level of investment continues to reflect the changes in cost and demand.

It was concluded by the Committee that the programmes developed by children's services such as locality hubs, the family safeguarding model, the family drug and alcohol court, and the Daisy project were all aimed at improving outcomes for children and families and reducing costs to the authority.

5.2 The Committee Resolved:

That the Committee noted the draft revenue budget proposals and draft capital schemes.

6. Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 2 February 2023

- 6.1 The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration introduced the report and underlined that it was still a time of budgetary pressures but a balanced budget had been set.

The Executive Director for Economy, Environment and Communities highlighted amendments that had been made to the Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme since the papers for the meeting were distributed to the Committee

which included an additional £207,000 in contractual inflation. He also advised of two policy changes due to consultation feedback and equality impact assessments with the removal of savings related to the outsourcing of the Mobile/Home Library service and removal of the introduction of charges for advisory disabled parking bays. The Capital Programme was also to be amended to reflect the monies to be received following the successful bid for Levelling Up funding for Willenhall.

Members of the Committee expressed their support for the retention of the Mobile/Home Library service following consultation responses and equalities assessments.

Questions were asked in relation to the commitment to tackle derelict sites, the investment in memorial safety in cemeteries and the pilot scheme for public toilets in Willenhall and Bloxwich. The Committee concluded that all these proposals were beneficial for the authority and for its residents.

6.2 The Committee Resolved:

That the Committee noted the draft revenue budget proposals and draft capital schemes.