

TRAFFORD COUNCIL

Report to: Executive
Date: 29th January 2024
Report for: Decision
Report of: Scrutiny Committee Chair
Report Title

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE EXECUTIVE'S DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2024-2025

Summary

The Executive's Draft Budget Proposals for 2024-2025 were agreed at its meeting held on 15th November 2023.

Two Budget Scrutiny Working Group sessions were held on the 28th and 30th November 2023 with the relevant Executive Members and Senior Officers in attendance to address Members questions. Members were also provided with background information on the budget proposals.

This report reflects the outcome of those discussions, summarises areas, and provides recommendations for the Executive to consider in developing its final budget proposals and response to the Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendation(s)

The Executive are asked to consider the following recommendations:

- 1. That the Executive keep all Councillors informed of the Council's full lobbying plans and for Scrutiny to have input to those plans.**
- 2. That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance continue to lobby the Government over support to Local Authorities and where possible work with other local authorities in doing so.**
- 3. That the Executive provide the Scrutiny Committee with further information on how the savings listed within the savings plan would be achieved and provide the plans that support their success.**
- 4. That Scrutiny support the Executive producing a communications strategy which can inform residents of the financial restraints of the Council and reasons behind any service changes provided by the Council.**

5. That the Executive explores the closure of Trafford Town Hall once a week and provides Scrutiny with any negative impacts that are found from this change if they occur.
6. That the Executive continue to monitor reserves closely and inform the Scrutiny Committee if further concerns are raised around the Council's levels of reserves.
7. That the Executive be requested to continue to monitor increased income and opportunities for income generated through contract changes with Amey and keep Scrutiny updated on results of this.
8. That the Executive look to increase transparency on the service management process in both Children and Adults services and highlight these changes to a future meeting of Scrutiny for comment.

Background Papers: None

Contact person for further information:

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BUDGET SCRUTINY REPORT – 2023/24

Foreword by the Chair of Scrutiny Committee

I welcome the opportunity for Scrutiny to review and comment on the draft proposals at an early stage. On behalf of Scrutiny Members, I would like to thank the Executive Members and Corporate Leadership Team for their commitment, help and contribution to our scrutiny of the draft budget proposals. I would also like to thank Scrutiny Members who played an important part in the process and whose contribution was invaluable.

Trafford Council, like many Councils across the Country, are it finding difficult to balance the budget as a result of 14 years of Austerity, which has meant the Council has had a reduction of around £300M taken out its budget since Austerity Measures were put in place. These measures, put alongside the Pandemic and Cost of Living Crises, are putting a huge strain on the Council budget. Scrutiny Members raised a great deal of concern for our communities, and particularly our most vulnerable residents. All of these issues mean that the Council have had to cut back on the level of Services it can provide to our residents, however Members, the Council Executive and Officers are committed to support our communities as much as possible through these difficult times. Scrutiny Members are very supportive of the Executive to continue to Lobby Government over support for Local Authorities to receive improved funding, Members also support the Executive producing a communications strategy which can inform residents of the financial restraints of the Council and the reasons behind any service changes provided by the Council.

I would like to put on record my thanks to the Executive and Corporate Leadership Team for the work they have carried out during the very difficult period in managing the budget. I would also like to thank All the staff, Partners, the many Volunteers, and Council Members for the support and dedication they have displayed to Trafford residents and businesses throughout these extremely difficult times.

We hope that our Budget Scrutiny will contribute to the decision-making process in ensuring that robust measures are in place to manage the challenges Trafford faces. We have identified areas where we feel that there are risks and we look forward to receiving details of how the Executive will address these. We will be following up on a number of areas in our work programme for the next municipal year.

Councillor David Acton

Chair, Scrutiny Committee.

January 2024

Background

1.1 As the Normal budget presentation was not able to be undertaken at the Scrutiny Committee in November 2023 (due to the by-election), the Chair of Scrutiny with Officers agreed that Budget Scrutiny would focus upon the Place Directorate, the Council's reserves, the investment strategy, lobbying for fairer funding, Children's Services, Adults Services, and all savings proposals. The first session covered the Place directorate, the reserves, investment strategy, and lobbying for fairer funding with the second session focused upon Children's and Adult's Services.

1.2 A presentation was produced, covering information for both sessions, and circulated to Councillors on the 24th November 2023, which gave Scrutiny Members time to review the documents prior to the sessions and request additional information.

2. Key Messages

2.1 Over the course of the Budget Scrutiny process several key themes, detailed below, emerged as being of particular interest to Scrutiny Members.

2.2 Lobbying

2.2.1 During the first session, some members raised concern regarding the lack of action by National Government to provide sufficient support to local authorities. Scrutiny welcomed the Lobbying Strategy from the Executive Member for Finance and Governance and would like all Councillors to be informed of the full lobbying plans moving forward, and to have Scrutiny provide input to those plans.

Recommendations:

- 1. That the Executive keep all Councillors informed of the Council's full lobbying plans and for Scrutiny to have input to those plans.**
- 2. That the Executive Member for Finance and Governance continue to lobby the Government over support to Local Authorities and where possible work with other local authorities in doing so.**

2.3 Savings Plan

2.3.1 Members of the Scrutiny Committee enquired as to whether plans had been built in behind the savings plan, laid out during the first session. The Director of Finance informed members that there were plans that sat behind the aims of the wider savings plan. Scrutiny requested that these be shared with the Committee to provide further understanding of how the aims set out in the savings plan, will be achieved and supported.

Recommendation:

That the Executive provide the Scrutiny Committee with further information on how the savings listed within the savings plan would be achieved and provide the plans that support their success.

2.4 Communication Strategy

2.4.1 Over the course of both sessions there were several concerns raised about residents not being provided the clear detail of the financial strains of which the Council was under. Scrutiny felt that it would be important that with any potential future changes to the services provided by the Council, that residents be informed as to why these changes are being made, to ensure they have the sufficient context.

2.4.2 The Executive Member for Finance, Change and Governance emphasised with members and felt that the story needed to be told. She informed Scrutiny that she had begun work on establishing a Communications Strategy, alongside the Council's communications team.

Recommendation –

That Scrutiny support the Executive producing a communications strategy which can inform residents of the financial restraints of the Council and reasons behind any service changes provided by the Council.

2.5 Closure of Trafford Town Hall

2.5.1 Scrutiny welcomed exploring the idea of closing Trafford Town Hall once a week. Some members felt that the closure would be of little impact to residents and that the savings would be positive. Scrutiny requested that they were updated on any impacts of a closure and that the Executive continually monitors the impacts to ensure that it remains a viable saving.

Recommendation –

That the Executive explores the closure of Trafford Town Hall once a week and provides Scrutiny with any negative impacts that are found from this change if they occur.

2.6 Reserves

2.6.1 Scrutiny raised concern around the levels of reserves presented during the first session. The Director of Finance assured Members that the aim was to be as open and transparent about reserves as possible and explained the detail behind different elements of the reserves available to the Council.

2.6.2 Scrutiny questioned whether the Council would be in a position to offset additional losses in association with the shortfall identified with business rates relating to the Trafford Centre. The Director of Finance informed Members how the Council were careful around managing the amounts they forecast to not overestimate what

can be expected. Concern was also raised about un-earmarked reserves which was down to around £10M, which was low for a Council with a budget the size of Trafford. Scrutiny requested that they are kept updated around any further concerns to the Council's reserves.

Recommendation –

That the Executive continue to monitor reserves closely and inform the Scrutiny Committee if further concerns are raised around the Council's levels of reserves.

2.7 Amey Income

2.7.1 Scrutiny welcomed the increased income generated through contract changes following the recent Amey 7-year review and enquired as to whether the Council hoped this would be something that increases in the future as Amey takes on more work.

2.7.2 The Corporate Director for Place welcomed this and informed Scrutiny of his hope that this income would rise in the forthcoming years. The Executive Member for Highways alerted the Committee to plans for future offers for private companies, where the Council can provide seamless opportunities, which will leave the Council well placed to receive further funding. Scrutiny requests that they are kept aware of future increases in income generated by working alongside Amey.

Recommendation –

That the Executive be requested to continue to monitor increased income and opportunities for income generated through contract changes with Amey and keep Scrutiny updated on results of this.

2.8 Service Management Process for Children and Adults Services

2.8.1 Scrutiny raised concern during the second session around the service management process for children and adults' services and felt that this needed increased transparency.

Recommendation –

That the Executive look to increase transparency on the service management process in both Children and Adults services and highlight these changes to a future meeting of Scrutiny for comment.