

Comments from Budget Planning Committee

At its meeting of Tuesday 18 August 2020, the Budget Planning Committee considered the report submitted to the 20 August 2020 Executive, which proposed a revised budget for 2020/21 to reflect the financial impact of Covid 19 and included proposed savings required in order to achieve a balanced budget.

The Budget Planning Committee considered the in-year savings proposals and proposed use of reserves and asking a number of questions which were duly answered by the relevant Lead Member and Corporate Director.

Having conducted a detailed scrutiny of the proposals, the Budget Planning Committee resolved to endorse the 2020/21 in-year savings proposals and recommended the Executive recommend to Full Council that they be adopted at the Special Council on 7 September 2020. The Committee made the following comments:

- **Revised Building Control Fee Schedule:**

- Clarity was provided that the 5% increase referred to the overall across the board increase and some individual fees were increased by a higher percentage.
- It was noted that the proposed fees were bringing Cherwell District Council to the average level for comparable neighbouring local authorities but Members queried if they were comparative to independent building control inspectors. Approved Inspectors are not required to publish their fees as we in the public sector are required to. CDC Building Control's market share is currently at around 70% and increasing which would indicate it is competitive.
- In response to questions regarding a behavioural impact assessment, it was confirmed that this had not been undertaken as there would be additional cost top carrying out such an assessment. It is standard Cherwell DC practice, as for other Building Control services in neighbouring areas, for comparisons to be made between Authorities in the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire cluster group and fees adjusted accordingly. The exercise requires proposed fee increases to be balanced against the risk of under-recovery of costs and therefore set an appropriate level. Experience has shown that customers of CDC Building Control service are more interested in service than cost, noting that the cost of a Building Control application is very small compared with the construction cost of a development.

- **Delayed Recruitment to Vacant Posts due to Covid-19:**

- Noted that delayed recruitment was not impacting service delivery due to reallocating work and new ways of working.
- Kidlington Co-ordinator (Growth and Economy): Assurance was given that recruitment to the post was delayed and as a new post, there had been no impact on service provision.
- 5 Wellbeing p/t posts: the work these discretionary posts would have undertaken would not have been possible with the covid restrictions
- Community Warden: Noted that 3 Community Warden posts were filled and there was one vacancy for which recruitment was being paused for in-year

savings. Along with all other options, the post would be reviewed as part of the 2021/22 budget setting process.

- **Deletion of Vacant Posts**
 - Assurance was provided that deleting two vacant Planning posts and two Growth Deal workstream posts would not impact service delivery. The Growth Deal posts had been planned to be created as part of last years' growth bid to support the Growth Deal, however this work had been delayed due to Covid-19 and the removal of the posts would not affect the council's Growth Deal work.
- **Housing Services: Reduction in Shared Ownership Scheme Contribution**
 - In response to queries from Members of the Committee regarding if there would be any impact on affordable housing, advised that is difficult to quantify the number of houses affected and a response would be provided to Members outside of the meeting. The reduction is a proportion of the total budget and Housing Officers will continue to work with applicants for Homes England funding.
- **LED Project (replacement lighting at Bodicote House)**
 - In response to queries as to why the project had been deleted and not delayed, the Committee was advised that the long term future of all estates would be considered as there would not be a return to the office as it was pre-covid
 - It was confirmed that no other projects responding to climate emergency have been proposed to be paused or cancelled
- **Increase in Bulky Collections Fees**
 - The Committee recommended that fly tipping levels were monitored to assess if there was an impact of the increased fees on incidences of fly tipping
- **Treasury Management**
 - Clarity was provided that the savings were due to reduced costs of borrowing with better interest rates for new borrowing and replacement borrowing.
- **Use of Ear-marked Reserves**
 - Clarification given that the reserves which would be used towards balancing the budget were General Balances which is held for general purposes and the Commercial Reserve, which is earmarked towards commercial property income losses
- **Senior Pay**
 - In response to a question from a Committee member regarding whether reductions in Executive salary had been considered, the Committee was advised that for in-year savings reductions in pay and/or changes in terms and conditions had not been proposed. It was noted that changes to contractual pay and terms require formal consultation with staff affected and unions and should be considered as part of a wider view of senior

management costs and structures, with a focus on the full costs of management rather than just the pay of certain roles.

- The Committee was advised that as part of work considering the budget for 2021/22 a view will be taken with regards to these matters in the context of the joint working relationship with Oxfordshire County Council (many senior staff cover roles at both the County and Cherwell District Council) and the more significant budget pressures facing the council in 2021/22. The Committee was given assurance that the work undertaken would be evidence-based, for example comparisons with national pay across the sector, and where necessary seek objective and specialist advice, for example the regional employers associations.
 - The Committee was reminded that matters regarding structures, pay, terms and conditions are considered by the Council's formally constituted cross party Personnel Committee. This Committee is generally held in confidential session, to protect the identity of individuals affected by any proposals considered and to comply with the formal consultation processes and engagement with our recognised Unions in line with the Council's HR policies and employment law.
- **Lobbying of Government re. Funding**
 - The Committee noted and supported the on-going lobbying of Government by Local Authority Leaders, the Local Government Association and District Councils Network for additional funding for local Government.