

## **BUDGET PANEL**

**23 FEBRUARY 2016**

Present: Councillor A Khan (Chair)  
Councillor A Joynes (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors N Bell, S Counter, G Derbyshire, M Hofman,  
R Martins and T Williams

Also present: Councillor Watkin (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

Officers: Head of Finance  
Head of Revenues and Benefits  
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (IM)

### **33 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

No apologies had been received from Councillor Whitman.

### **34 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

### **35 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2016 were submitted and signed.

### **36 UPDATE ON ACTIONS**

The Committee reviewed the update on actions from the previous meeting.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- Councillor Bell had received some information regarding the Town Hall Annexe relocation and it was requested that this be circulated to all Panel members
- On the question of the Council's policy on outstanding debt, the Head of Revenue and Benefits advised that a comprehensive toolbox of options was available. This included:
  - attachment of earnings orders, which instructed a person's employer to stop money from their wages to pay back debt to the

- Council, currently 155 were in place (up from 134 last year) securing debt value of £217,085.60
- attachment of benefit orders against other benefit sources, for example, pensions, job seekers allowance and income support, currently 239 were in place (up from 181 last year) securing debt value of £243,859.54
- charging orders against a person's home to secure the debt such that, if the house were sold before the debt was cleared, the charging order would be paid off from the proceeds, currently 250 were in place securing debt value £260,897
- application to committal courts – used only after other methods of trying to recover money owed to the Council had been unsuccessful
- insolvency actions – primarily used for business rates and for individuals with sizeable assets – two recent cases had yielded over £200,000 in payments prior to a court hearing
- bailiff recovery – debt recovery was reported to be up from £667,971 to £755,454 (period 1/4/15 to 31/1/16).

There followed some discussion about Appendix 8 of the Finance Digest (invoices outstanding from 1 April 2015 to 31 January 2016). The Head of Revenue and Benefits advised that £1.3 million of this total was less than one month old and was expected to be paid.

Discussing the £269,227 of unallocated payments, the Head of Revenue and Benefits clarified that this might be due to a number of issues, including payments which had yet to be matched against invoices, payments received ahead of invoicing and disputed invoices. These payments required some investigation by staff and there was an inevitable delay in processing them.

Councillor Joynes questioned whether the Council signposted debtors to any independent charities for advice. She mentioned the Step Change debt advice charity. In addition, Councillor Watkin suggested National Debtline. The Head of Revenue and Benefits agreed to investigate these organisations to see whether it would be appropriate for the Council to refer residents to them for advice.

- The Panel considered Appendix 1 to the actions update which outlined section 106 contributions in 2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19. It was reported that these would decrease over time following the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) on 1 April 2015. As a consequence, future section 106 planning obligations would only be used to secure affordable housing provision and other site specific requirements.

Looking at the figures for 2015/16, Councillor Derbyshire requested further information on the Cassiobury Park HLF (Heritage Lottery Funded) Project (WAB966). Councillor Joynes sought a list of the local nature reserves (WAB962).

RESOLVED –

that Budget Panel notes the update on actions and signs off those which have been completed.

**ACTION – Head of Revenue and Benefits**

- to investigate whether the Council should signpost debtors to any independent charities for advice.

**ACTION – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer**

- to circulate to Panel members the information regarding the Town Hall Annexe relocation received by Councillor Bell
- to obtain further information on the Cassiobury Park HLF Project included in Appendix 1
- to obtain a list of the local nature reserves included in Appendix 1.

37

**FINANCE DIGEST 2015/2016: PERIOD 10**

The Panel received the latest Finance Digest, covering the period to the end of January 2016, by the Finance Shared Service. This showed the expected financial position at the end of the financial year, based on the actual performance at the end of January 2016 (period 10).

The Head of Finance highlighted aspects of the digest. He advised that the picture had not changed greatly since the Panel had last been updated. The forecast outturn for the end of the year was predicted to be £16,572,000, leaving an overall favourable variance of £225,000.

It was noted that the rising costs of providing temporary accommodation was impacting on the Community and Customer Services share of the budget, which had an unfavourable variance of £285,000.

Councillor Hofman questioned the Council's investment strategy and reiterated the Panel's suggestion that there should be some diversification in the management of the reserves in order to achieve better returns.

In response to a question from the Chair about unrealistic forecasting on capital spend, the Head of Finance confirmed that the figures required more challenge in future. It was suggested that this might form a new focus of work for Budget Panel in 2016/17.

Councillor Williams drew attention to the table showing the transaction methods used for Council Tax collection. Focussing on the percentage of direct debit payments (67.85% of the total), it was suggested that Revenue and Benefits should establish a higher target for direct debit use in 2016/17.

RESOLVED –

that Budget Panel notes the content of the Finance Digest.

ACTION – Head of Finance

- to include a focus on capital spend forecasting in the Budget Panel’s work programme for 2016/17.

ACTION – Head of Revenue and Benefits

- to revise upwards the target set for transactions using direct debit in 2016/17.

38

**VOTE OF THANKS**

Noting that Councillors Derbyshire and Counter would not be seeking re-election in May, the Chair expressed the Panel’s gratitude for their useful contributions to discussions throughout their years on Budget Panel.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm  
and finished at 8.10 pm