

Notes from the meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Panel Phase 2 – Enabling Services – 8th January 2024

Present

Budget Scrutiny Panel Members

Cllr Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
Cllr Lora Lawman (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Jim Hakewill
Cllr Richard Levell
Cllr Anne Lee
Cllr Paul Marks
Cllr Russell Roberts

Apologies were received from Cllr Zoe McGhee (Cllr Lee substituting)

Executive Members

Cllr Lloyd Bunday (Finance and Transformation)

Enabling Services Officers

Guy Holloway (Assistant Chief Executive)
Adele Wylie (Executive Director of Customer and Governance)
Simon Mills (Assistant Director of Customer Experience)
Jeandre Hunter (Head of Procurement)
Lucy Hogston (Assistant Director of Revenue and Benefits)
Rachel Ashley-Caunt (Chief Internal Auditor)
Sanjit Sull (Assistant Director of Legal and Governance)

Finance Officers

Janice Gotts (Executive Director for Finance and Performance)
Mark Dickenson (Assistant Director for Finance and Strategy)
Claire Edwards (Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy)
Jeff Abbott (Strategic Finance Business Partner)
Niall Blowfield (Senior Finance Business Partner)

Democratic Services Officers

Louise Tyers (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Committee considered a presentation by the officers of Enabling Services, which outlined the proposed 2024/25 directorate budget and the key risks relating to services the directorate delivered.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

Overview

- i) There would be a balanced budget for 2024/25, however there would be significant pressures in future years. Acknowledging that a balanced budget was a necessity, but some members felt that services which mattered to residents were being taken out of the budget to support the demand-led budgets.
- ii) In response to a question as to how many of the FTE posts within the department were funded, officers confirmed that all posts were budgeted for however, a vacancy factor was also included to allow for turnover. A question was also asked on how many people were actually in post.

Action: The Executive Director of Customer and Governance undertook to speak to HR colleagues about how the information can be obtained whilst ERP Gold was unavailable.

Finance and Performance

- iii) It would be helpful for next year that along with a figure for pressures/savings, it was also shown as a percentage of the budget.
- iv) It was the additional income of £4.6m from rises in interest rates guaranteed or would it be affected by changes in the rates over the year? Officers advised that it was a fixed rate of return and would not fluctuate.

Customer and Governance

- v) The Council was looking at alternative ways to fund the Wellbeing Advisor post which was shown as a saving. It was a vacant post so there would be no redundancy.
- vi) Officers explained that the additional income for legal services commercialisation was around looking to support town and parish councils with their legal requirements. There would also be additional income around the school admissions process.
- vii) The proposed service plan objective of developing a business case for legal delivery of children's services was in the early stages and would be looking at bringing those legal services for the Children's Trust in-house.
- viii) Concern was raised at possible changes to customer contacts. In response, officers advised that multiple outreach sessions had been inherited and it was a matter of reviewing them and seeing if they could be delivered in a better way. Any changes would be information led. Posts at each hub would be looked at along with the building, ensuring that there was the capacity and resilience to answer calls.

- ix) Concern was raised that a proposed saving of £157k had been put into the budget before Members had been consulted about the potential impact on communities.
- x) There was concern that the proposed savings on changes in levels of occupational health provision could have a significant impact with longer waiting times for assessments. It was queried if the possible impacts had been considered?

Action: The Executive Director undertook to respond outside of the meeting on whether the possible impacts on the level of occupational health provision had been considered.

ICT

- xi) ICT was one of the biggest risk areas for the Council and investment was needed. The Plan B if the systems failed, possibly due to a cyber-breach, was queried? Officers agreed that cyber breaches can have a significant effect on the Council. The strategy had been developed over the past 18 months and it was important that good virus protection was in place. Staff attitudes and behaviours were also very important around cyber-security.
- xii) The Silver Level Programme was queried as being necessary and whether it had received the correct challenge? It was confirmed that it had been discussed at a high level and appropriate business cases would be needed to draw down funding.
- xiii) It was queried if the Council received value for money for our ICT and what protection there was in the contract with West Northamptonshire Council to enable full disaggregation. Officers confirmed that comparisons on the North Northamptonshire Council's spend with other authorities had been drawn and that it was not above average, however the Council was less mature than some authorities. Disaggregation of ICT was being discussed with members and officers and a number of governance decisions still needed to be made.
- xiv) It was also queried whether the Council was making best use of economies of scale in ICT. It was confirmed that the biggest economy of scale would be a move from multiple systems across former sovereign council areas to single systems.
- xv) The Education Case Management System contract was a significant pressure. Officers clarified that this was required to extend the existing contract until a new NNC system was implemented.
- xvi) Concern was expressed at shutting down the four legacy websites as they held a large amount of information, which was often needed for analysing decisions. The cost of maintaining those sites for a number of years compared to turning them off was queried. Officers advised that whilst they were keen to get as much onto the new website, they did not wish to lose information. Information

around reports and minutes would remain available, similar to what had happened to the previous County Council information.

Chief Executive's Office

No budget changes were proposed.

Corporate Services

- xvii) LOBO loans – there was a potential for £17m to be called in over the next 12 months and this had been projected in our treasury forecasting.
- xviii) Pay contingency had been included as the pay award for 2023/24 had been slightly higher than had been budgeted for and the difference had come out of general contingency. If anything came out of general contingency, it was topped up if used.
- xix) Following the financial issues at Birmingham City Council around equal pay, it was queried whether this was a risk for NNC? Officers confirmed that work was being done to ensure that we were not in that position.

End of Meeting