

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL  
SPECIAL CABINET – 19 JANUARY 2021

Recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 13 January 2021:-

28. SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS PROGRESS REPORTS AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS

Members received an update from the Chair of the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Panel. The Panel had been tasked to review the proposed budget and make appropriate recommendation for the Committee to consider. The Chair of the Panel confirmed that there was one Recommendation being put forward concerning the management of reserves.

The Panel had considered the Council Tax Hardship Fund, in the expectation that there would likely be more applicants in subsequent years. The Panel asked officers to investigate whether other preceptors could contribute to the council tax hardship fund. It was noted that Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council funds 100% of the hardship fund, even though it receives only 12% of the council tax revenue. The Panel therefore asked the Executive Member for Resources and the Chief Executive to approach their counter parts at the county council level to ask if Hertfordshire County Council could share the cost of the hardship fund. Officers confirmed that an approach was made. Unfortunately colleagues at Hertfordshire County Council declined the suggestion, citing the following reasons. The first reason was that it was not unusual for individual borough councils to fund their own hardship schemes. The second reason was that if county did agree to contribute to Welwyn Hatfield's hardship fund scheme, similar requests would likely be received from other borough councils, leading to substantial costs.

The Panel recorded eleven proposals they wished to be considered as part of this process. One proposal was an increase on a charge already included in the budget; two were classed as savings or redistribution of funds; four were centred on long term future projects; and the remaining proposals concerned relatively small wellbeing projects for the community.

Suggestion put forward by the Panel included:

- setting aside money for a determined future event, subject to Covid-19 restrictions being lifted;
- a project to improve communal gardens around sheltered accommodation and bungalows;
- grants for minority groups to access;
- increasing the hardship fund for renters;
- amending the corporate project budget, with a view to increasing savings and/or alleviating budget pressures;

- decarbonising the housing stock and the council's own facilities;
- carrying out review of non-housing assets, particularly land holding;
- comparing the council's Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) rates with other councils;
- reviewing use of Council offices and space in a post-Covid world;
- reviewing the Brown Bin charge (which had not increased since its introduction);
- explore other uses for Campus West as a community asset;

A number of the proposals linked to wellbeing in the community, such as the communal garden project and grants for minority group were already explored as part of the budget setting process. Longer term proposals would be considered in due course by the Cabinet and/or appropriate committee.

The Panel also considered the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), in particular whether some funds should be used to protect front line services given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and uncertainty surrounding central government funding in future years. This has led the Panel to recommend a review being undertaken of the reserves to ensure funds were being used effectively, and avoid multiple reserves being kept for overlapping purposes. The Executive Member for Resources, Councillor D.Bell, agreed that this was a good idea and could be carried out without requiring changes to the current budget proposal.

The Panel queried the proposed changes to leisure prices, which seemed to rise by a higher percentage than other fees and prices. The Panel were informed that some charges were statutory and the leisure fees, even with the proposed increased, would remain lower than comparable prices in other parts of Hertfordshire.

The Chair of the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Panel advised the Committee that the Panel, whilst not agreeing with all the decisions taken in the proposed budget, believe it to be, from a scrutiny perspective, a sound budget.

Members agreed that the new process for scrutinising the budget should be reviewed to ensure lesson learned could be incorporated into the process next year. It was noted that the process had facilitated the sharing of more information in a managed framework, allowing Members to review and consider different aspects in a sensible timeframe. Members recognised a specific need to scrutinise the budget proposal being presented to them and not attempt to propose an alternative package (which would not be classified as a budget). It was suggested that the Committee may wish to review how effectively the scrutiny process has worked by assessing how the budget has helped the council deliver on its corporate objectives six months after the budget has come into effect.

Members noted the four substantive discussion points highlighted in the report. Two were associated with reserve management as discussed above. Of the

remaining two one concerned council home targets, and the other concerned the proposed 1.97% Council Tax increase.

Members were informed that the issues around the 9,000 council home figure, and whether this number could be raised, would be discussed and taken forward by the Cabinet Housing Panel as it was judged to be outside of the scope of the Task and Finish Panel. Members briefly discussed whether there should be greater emphasis on ensuring the council's property portfolio was being fully utilised to either provide additional revenue and/or provide suitable sites for development. Specifically Members considered whether an opportunity was being missed. Officers confirmed that new opportunities were being explored and an update on the affordable housing programme would be provided at the next Cabinet Housing Panel on 2 March 2021.

Members were also informed that the decision to limit the percentage rise in Council Tax to 1.97% as oppose to the opportunity to increase it by £5 was queried by the Panel. It was confirmed that this was a political decision.

**RESOLVED:** The Panel's recommendation to investigate potential overlaps between the reserves, in order to ascertain whether there are any risks that had been covered multiple times, was accepted. The recommendation would be put to the Special Cabinet at their meeting on 19 January 2021.

(Note: the minutes from the Task and Finish Panel as presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 13 January 2021 can be seen at <https://democracy.welhat.gov.uk/documents/s15576/Minutes%202021.01.06.pdf>)