

Report back from other Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Draft Capital and Revenue Budget Proposals 2025/26

Summary

This Appendix presents for consideration the comments of all Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committees on the provisional draft budget for 2025/2026 proposed by Cabinet on 19 November 2024.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 19 November 2024 Cabinet considered the draft capital and revenue budgets for 2025/2026 and agreed to forward these to all Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committees as work in progress inviting them to offer comments on the proposals outlined.
- 1.2 The Business Support and Digital O&S Committee has a pivotal role in the consultation process that surrounds Cabinet's construction of the budget. It has the responsibility to scrutinise and comment on the proposals. To this end the other O&S Committees have been invited to forward their comments to inform the process of scrutiny by this Committee as part of the constitutional consultation requirement for budget formulation.
- 1.3 The views expressed by the O&S Committees during this consultation period will be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 11 February 2025.

2. Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/2026

- 2.1 The draft proposals discussed by Cabinet were disaggregated into overview and scrutiny responsibilities and each Committee has been asked to consider the draft proposals pertinent to their area of responsibility and comment back to this Committee.
- 2.2 All of the other O&S Committees – dates included for information – have now had the opportunity to consider the budget proposals recommended by Cabinet and their views are set out in this Appendix.

Business Support and Digital O&S Committee	28 November 2024 and this meeting
Children and Young People O&S Committee	3 December 2024
Health and Adult Social Care O&S Committee	5 December 2024
Regeneration, Culture and Environment O&S Committee	12 December 2024

2.3 The relevant extracts from the minutes of these Committees are set out below.

2.4 Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 28 November 2024

Discussion:

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the draft budget report which set out the budget projections for 2025-26, she highlighted the budget provided for a net growth of £26m in the next financial year.

The Chief Finance Officer added that section 13 of the report outlined key announcements in the recent budget, detailed grant allocations were expected to be announced in the week commencing 16 December, but the overall effect was expected to be broadly positive for the Council.

Section 14 of the report noted the Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) which would be required to meet the budget gap. This was projected to be £26m, officers and Portfolio Holders continued to work to close that gap.

The following issues were discussed:

Cuts to Services – a Member noted that following the request for EFS last year, cuts to services were announced, he asked whether there were proposed cuts in services or rises in fees associated with the 2025-26 draft budget. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the proposals include the full year impact of some reductions agreed last year, but primarily the proposals relate to projected additional income, including from leisure services following a review of fees and charges to meet the additional costs of running those services, and from events at the Corn Exchange following its successful refurbishment.

Children's Services were reviewing costs principally through managing demand and effective use of services keeping costs low.

The Business Support and centralised proposals relate to the department focusing on rightsizing back office functions and investing to save in transformation.

Medpay – A Member asked if the Council would need to borrow to fund Medpay, the Chief Finance Officer explained that EFS would be required to fund the budget gap, however it was not allocated to particular services and not directly related to Medpay.

A Member commented that in his view the proposed pay rise and costs of Medpay were not prudent at the current time. The Chief Finance Officer stated that the Council wanted to retain experienced staff and had to correct where pay rises were below that of its peers for a number of years which had affected recruitment and retention issue for the Council.

A Member commented that the budget was developed to provide statutory services and include rightsizing those services which had struggled to recruit and retain staff.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted that Cabinet had instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to reduce the budget deficit for 2025/26 and to continue to liaise with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to secure support through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme.
- b) The Committee commented on the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/26 as set out in the minutes and forwarded the proposals on to the individual overview and scrutiny committees.

2.5 Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 December 2024

Discussion:

Members received a presentation on finance and considered the reports under this theme.

Members then raised several questions and comments:

The medium term financial position was a challenge as financial pressures continued to grow and this would be challenging for Medway, the review being undertaken by Central Government was welcomed.

Government financial support for Local Authorities - in response to a question on whether the Government announcement on financial support would ease the pressures of the anticipated overspend, the Committee was informed that the Government, in announcing the budget were clear that they recognised that local authorities had been underfunded and were keen to address issues with pressures. Additionally, changes would be made to distribution of funding, details of which were yet to emerge.

In the policy statement, it was made clear that distribution of funding would be based on need, with increased funding directed to Local Authorities that had higher areas of deprivation or who were less able to raise income through local taxation. It was currently difficult to estimate what the announcement meant for Medway who were amongst the 20 lowest funded local authorities per resident in England. The caveat for consideration by officers in terms of increased funding was whether additional costs may materialise.

Overspend - it was asked what the likelihood of overspend would be for the coming year given that Medway continued to experience increased migration, which would increase budgetary pressures on the Council. It was explained that budgetary predictions were made with the best information available at the time and it was difficult to predict in totality what would happen each year.

The report alluded to the considerable savings to be made from SEND transport and it was asked what knock on effects had been considered. The Committee was advised that Medway had to date been generous with its transport policy, providing significantly more than neighbouring authorities and more than required statutorily.

Legislation had changed to reflect that children with an EHCP did not have to be provided with transport if they were not attending their nearest suitable school.

It was further commented that it was vital to ensure that all implications of non provision of transport be looked into and not just the savings that could be made. Members were reminded that decisions for children on EHCPs were made based on need. A banding system was in operation and each child received the same amount of funding regardless of whether in mainstream or SEND specialist provision. There was an increased drive for inclusiveness as part of the national as well as Medway's agenda, for provision for all children in mainstream schools.

Travel training - members of the Committee commented that more was needed to be done to support independence of SEND children, including provision of travel training to support transition to adulthood. Officers said that there was a transport group in place exploring options and the Council would also be working with Medway Parents and Carers Forum, who currently provided travel training. Further work was planned on empowering children to use public transport.

It was asked what wider work had been undertaken in SEND and viewed as priorities for the next 3-5 years. The Committee learned that there was anticipated significant growth in pupil numbers due to inward migration of families and as a result transport would continue to be a challenge. Additionally, there were many children that still attended specialist provision outside of Medway, this remained a challenge due to the significant continued uplift in associated costs. Reviews were ongoing, with exploration of different ranges of options. Council wide, further exploration was needed on the travel infrastructure of Medway to make travel easier and more accessible for families.

Reduced timetables - it was commented that some children in specialist provision were placed on short timetables as a means to manage issues and it was asked whether there would be provision in the budget to assist schools in providing extra support should it be needed. The Committee was informed that schools went through a graduated approach and layered on support as needed. At a point where they experienced difficulties in meeting needs or required additional funding, they approached the local authority for support. In all cases, officers worked with schools and families to understand the needs of the child. Schools had a duty to report the implementation of a reduced timetable, the team would review what the timetable entailed, and any concerns were discussed with the school.

A Member of the Committee added that it was important to note that reduced timetables were not implemented as a means to reducing a child's access to education, it was used solely as a temporary measure whilst work was undertaken on reintegration of the child onto a full timetable. Reduced timetables were effective and useful when used appropriately.

Advice - the Committee was informed that parents were able to access SEND inclusion advice and support from the family hubs, in particular in instances where parents and carers felt relationships had broken down with the school.

It was asked how the additional investment that was proposed in the journey of children's social care from good to outstanding would involve and how would this

drive fit into the wider plans of the service. The Committee was informed that investment would be made in recruitment, increase in staffing capacity, including management. Review was being undertaken on the Early Help service which had experienced increase in contact and now required additional support. Further investment in placement of children locally and increased support for those placed outside of Medway.

The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that the 2025/26 financial year was the penultimate year to make significant improvement ahead of the next Ofsted inspection and whilst confident that some categories could achieve outstanding, focus would be on ongoing stabilisation and consistency in service.

Impact of budget on families - concerns were highlighted as to the possible impact to families whilst the service trying to enforce budgetary controls and it was asked what safeguards were in place. The Committee was informed that the review work to develop the budget began early in the financial year, with officers asked to identify where pressures would be and predict what their service would look like in the year ahead. Those projections formed the basis of the draft budget. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that the approach taken in formulating the draft budget was welcomed and was confident that the budget being presented with continued to ensure the needs of children were met with the appropriate resources in place.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)- in response to a question on the use of AI in completion of paperwork, how risks would be managed through the pilot and dissemination of this way of working in other areas, officers said that AI would complete tasks alongside officers and comparisons would be made to identify gaps. Whilst the use of AI would save time, it would not negate the use of a human and would be used mainly as a quality assurance programme to ensure vital details were not missed out in case reports. The pilot would be run in a tempered and moderated way and AI used as a tool to support officers with efficiency. Caution would always be taken to ensure no replacement of human input.

In response to a question on investment in business change and transformation, the Committee learned that this was an ongoing area of investment that was included in this year's budget.

Decision:

a) The Committee noted that Cabinet has instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to reduce the budget deficit for 2025/26 and to continue to liaise with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to secure support through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme.

b) The Committee noted that their comments on the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/26 in so far as they relate to the services within the remit of this Committee are fed back to the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2025.

2.6 Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 December 2024

Discussion:

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the three budget related items, explaining that all three had been presented to Cabinet in November. She highlighted that in relation to the second round of revenue budget monitoring, this has seen an improvement of approximately £5m. In relation to the draft budget proposals for 2025/26 it was explained that the Government had published a local authority funding policy statement which it was believed would be positive for the Council but the provisional settlement was not expected until week commencing 16 December 2024.

Reference was made to the briefing that had been held for the Committee Members which provided them with some background into how the budget setting process worked, which Members had found incredibly valuable.

A query was raised about the risk categorisation around budget overspends within the capital budget monitoring – round 2 2024/25 report (at minute number 495). In response, the Chief Finance Officer explained that the risks within capital schemes were lower as it was much easier to adapt plans to match budget availability. However, the revenue budget overspends were much more attributable to demands in the Council's statutory duties and was therefore much more difficult to control and so the risk categorisation in both the revenue budget monitoring – round 2 2024/25 report and the report relating to the draft budgets for 2025/26 was higher to reflect that.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report and noted that Cabinet had instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to reduce the budget deficit for 2025/26 and to continue to liaise with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to secure support through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme.
- b) The Committee also agreed that its comments were fed back to the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January.

2.7 Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 12 December 2024

Discussion:

The Committee considered the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets for 2025/26. It was noted that in accordance with the Constitution, the Cabinet was required to develop 'initial budget proposals' approximately three months before finalising the budget and setting Council Tax levels at the end of February 2025. The Draft Budget was based on the principles set out in the Medium-Term Financial Outlook 2024-2029 (MTFO) considered by the Cabinet on 27 August 2024.

In response to a request for more granularity of the highways budget, it was noted that the Committee had previously agreed not to receive these reports in such detail, however a briefing note could be produced.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted that Cabinet had instructed officers to continue to work with Portfolio Holders in formulating robust proposals to reduce the budget deficit for 2025/26 and to continue to liaise with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to secure support through the Exceptional Financial Support scheme.
- b) The Committee requested a detailed briefing note to be circulated outside of the meeting, with a more detailed breakdown of the highways budget.
- c) The Committee noted the proposals outlined in the Draft Capital and Revenue Budgets 2025/26 in so far as they related to the services within the remit of the Committee and noted that this would be fed this back to the Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January.