

**Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel - 26 November 2020**  
**Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy**  
**2021-2022 to 2023-2024**  
**Minute Extract**

The Finance Business Partner introduced the report on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. They were asking the Scrutiny Panel to provide feedback on the Budget relevant to the Panel's remit and how it was aligned to the priorities of the Council. In addition, they were asking for feedback on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. The Panel's response would then be submitted to Scrutiny Board and then onward to Cabinet.

The Finance Business Partner commented that the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 was appended to the main report. It was different this year as there was a focus on the response to Covid-19. It detailed the costs of Covid-19 for the year and the projected financial implications for the medium term, this was alongside the grants that had been received. It considered the next steps the Council would need to implement in order to address the financial pressures faced by the Council. The report also set out the "Relighting our City" agenda and explained the transition from the response to the recovery phase of the pandemic. There was an assumption in the report that the Council were expecting the Government to provide sufficient grant funding to cover the cost of Covid-19. The forecast deficit with this assumption for 2021-2022 was £4.5 million rising to over £19.6 million over the medium term. Savings to help fill this gap were currently being considered by Directorates. If grants were not received to meet the pressures of Covid-19, the deficit would be significantly more and could rise to £23.2 million in 2021-2022, increasing to over £40 million over the medium term.

The Finance Business Partner remarked that on the previous day the Spending Review had been announced in Parliament. There were some indications that the Council would receive additional funding to help cover the costs of Covid-19, but they were still assessing the implications of the announcement for the Budget moving forward.

The Director for City Environment presented a slide on the key strategies and priorities of the directorate. He made reference to the Climate Change Action Plan, the Council had adopted the Climate Change emergency proposals earlier in the year. They would be working on the action plan and bring updates to Cabinet and Council in the coming months. The Director referred to the Waste Transformation Programme, the Waste Service had been brought back in house over two years ago. This had resulted in a much improved service being delivered to Wolverhampton residents and in particular over the last 10-11 months. They would be addressing in the future how the Waste Service could become more integrated with Street Scene and street cleansing. This would link with the Street Scene and Open Space Action Plans. Environment and Commercial regulation meant they were able when necessary to enforce the law, when other measures had not been successful.

The Director for City Environment stated that they would be bringing forward the Highways Capital Programme report as part of the budget setting in March / April next year. This would focus on not only improving the network but also supporting other modes of transportation such as cycling and walking. It was important to ensure that the improvement programme was also aligned with the City Regeneration Portfolio, so the City could continue to develop. The Street Lighting LED Programme had commenced earlier in the year and would provide budget efficiencies, improve the lighting in the City and create safer places across the City. With reference to car parks and highways enforcements, he commented that the main focus in this area was in relation to keeping the City safe, rather than income generation.

The Director for City Environment referred to the Markets Strategy. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions it had been a particularly challenging year for the City's markets. He gave full credit to the Markets team who had ensured that when they had been allowed to reopen, that they did so in a safe way. He was keen to increase the offer of the Markets moving forward, they could also be a good introduction to people who wished to start a business. He referred to the City Events Programme which he saw as a key part of the "Relighting our City" agenda. When it is safe and appropriate, he hoped it would be a great boost to the City. The Creation Day weekend in May had already been announced and the City would be hosting the Commonwealth Games Time Trial in 2022.

The Director for City Environment commented that it had been a difficult time for WV Active due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The business plan for next year would look to grow the business and return the membership to levels it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Housing Strategy had been discussed previously at the Panel. It was now ever more important to ensure the Council had the right number of properties and that the access, standard and tenure were appropriate to modern day living.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment commented that it had been a difficult year. Regardless of the financial pressures of Covid-19, the Council would have received a reduced Government grant anyway, which it had since 2010. Sadly, during the Covid-19 pandemic the Council had lost a significant amount of income, he cited as examples the Market rents, income from WV Active Membership and car parks. He hoped the Government would reward the Council with additional funding to help cover the costs of the continued pandemic. Regardless of whether the funding was received, the Directorate's budget would have to be reduced and so they would have to do things differently in order to make savings.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment praised the Garden Waste Service, Wolverhampton had been one of the few Council's which had been able to continue the service during the pandemic. This was in spite of the fact that many Council staff had been forced to self-isolate or had even tested positive for Covid-19. As the service was inhouse they had been able to utilise staff from other areas to continue operating the service. The number of subscriptions for the Garden Waste Service had actually increased. This had brought welcome income into the Council.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment commented on the unique challenges moving forward. The City Centre was one area of focus and the City's other High Streets. They were determined to support businesses. With reference to WV Active, he commented that they had been able to retain over 50% of their membership. They were looking to enhance the virtual WV Active offer. People were viewing these sessions all over the country and even in other countries in Europe. Other areas they were looking to change, were the replacement of fleet vehicles with electric one's, reconfiguring of depots and promoting the climate change agenda. He placed on record his sincere thanks to all Officers and staff across the Council who had been able to keep services running as normal as they could during the pandemic.

A Member of the Panel asked about the Capital Programme on Active Travel and the Environment strategy. £99,000 was listed in the report for the Active Travel Programme. He believed more investment was needed in the network to make Active Travel the priority in the transport infrastructure. He added that the Mayor of the West Midlands had promised £10 per head on cycling infrastructure when he was elected in 2017. This would equate to £2.5 million a year for the City of Wolverhampton. He did not believe this money had been received to the level promised.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy commented that a number of schemes relating to Active Travel had been put in place already in the City Centre. He agreed that more focus was needed on making a better environment for Active Travel and to making it safer. People needed to feel comfortable to encourage people to use other modes of transport. He did not however wish to ban the car, it was important to find the right balance. He did not believe the Mayor of the West Midlands would be able to reward any significant funding for Active Travel in Wolverhampton. He referred to some of the cycling routes throughout the City and hoped they could be further enhanced, such as a cycle route from the City Centre to the hospital. They were also considering participating in some electric cycle trials for staff.

The Director for City Environment commented that in addition to the Active Travel Programme funding listed in the report, there would be other investment in cycling through other capital programmes such as the Highways improvement Programme. They were awaiting to hear on whether some grant funding was going to be rewarded. Encouraging people to use other modes of transport was important and he hoped soon to announce a project with some local schools.

The Chair commented that he had requested the statistics from the WV Active Manager. They had been approaching 10,000 Members before the Pandemic which had reduced to about 65% before the start of the second national lockdown.

The Vice Chair asked if there could be a further breakdown of the expenditure and income listed in table 1 in the report in the future, which showed the service and revenue budget provision. He referred to Leisure Services and Parking, which Covid-19 had dramatically impacted and asked what considerations were taking place for the 2021-2022 budget because of the current volatility. He also asked what the total income was from the Garden Waste Service for the last twelve months. The

Capital Programme had highlighted the, "Lighting up the City" as an area for expenditure, he asked if some examples could be provided. He also asked if the Panel could consider adding the issue of fleet procurement as part of the Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Director for City Environment responded that fees and charges were continuing to be reviewed, this would include car parks and markets. He would send the Councillor the details for the Garden Waste Service income over the last twelve months. On the "Lighting Up the City" programme the main focus had been on lighting up key buildings in the City Centre and he hoped to light up more buildings in the future throughout the City. On the transport presentation planned for the January Scrutiny panel meeting, the fleet procurement approach could be included as part of the item. The Finance Business Partner commented that more information on the expenditure and income listed in table 1 in the report, which showed the service and revenue budget provision, could be provided in reports for future years going forward.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy spoke on Planning and Libraries, which fell within the remit of the Panel and his Portfolio. He praised the Library service during the Pandemic. E-books had been particularly popular and provided an insight into reshaping the service going forward. He detailed the services the Libraries had provided and how they had been utilised. Social media posts had been particularly popular and a range of virtual and telephone services had been provided.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy referred to planning applications, which had actually increased during the pandemic. 16,000 planning applications had been received in 2020, which compared to 15,000 for last year. He was encouraged that the service had been able to continue throughout the pandemic. He had asked Officers to try and make the Planning Department cost neutral in the future. He praised all the staff within his portfolio for their excellent work during the course of the pandemic to date. The Chair echoed the Portfolio's Holder's compliments and gave praise to all Council staff for their work.

**Resolved:** That the Scrutiny Panel response on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 be finalised by the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Panel and forwarded to Scrutiny Board for consideration.