

Chairman's introduction to the O&S Budget Report

As Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group I would like to thank Cllr Winston Michael, Cllr Mrs Marion Martin, Cllr Alex Howard, and Cllr Mick Burgess for their service to the Task Group and this Council. I would also like to thank Cllr Smith who attended and supported the Task Group. The scrutiny of the budget is one of the most important functions that Overview and Scrutiny must perform, and in times when there are budgetary constraints that task becomes ever more important.

In addition, I would like to thank all Cabinet Members and Lead Members that were able to attend our meetings to speak on behalf of their department and in demonstrating political ownership of their respective budgets. This trend was set a few years ago under my previous Chairmanship of the Task Group and I believe it has been beneficial to Cabinet Members and those providing scrutiny of the budget. We would like to thank Cllr Shorter in particular who attended all budget meetings.

Overview and Scrutiny is now housed within Corporate Services. Can I thank our team in Corporate Services who helped us through the process. Can I also thank Members Services for their support too. Many officers attended our meetings and answered questions and I would like to thank all of them for their time and commitment too.

The biggest issue, which arose from this year's scrutiny, was the issue of the increasing pressure on staff and staff resources. Every department expressed concern that the volume of work was difficult to deliver with current staffing levels. While Officers always perform well and deliver the objectives agreed by members, the Task Group is very concerned that corporately staff resource is at a critical point. Further reductions and increased workloads would lead to real and significant operational and strategic challenges to Ashford Borough Council. We have made some recommendations within the report to try to address this point.

The Task Group commends the administration for proposing an increase this year in the Council Tax of £2.67%. Increasing Council Tax plays an important role in countering inflation and supports the base budget and council resources. We note that despite this increase Ashford Borough Council will still have the lowest Council Tax in Kent.

As the government continues to make reductions to local authorities, the Task Group supports the administration in its attempts to make the Borough Council more commercial in its outlook. The Task Group believes that through purchasing property within the Borough, the Council will own assets, which will mature over time and provide a revenue stream.

Government changes in the provision of welfare continue to have an impact on the Borough Council. The removal of the Housing Benefit Subsidy is likely to have a severe impact on those affected. It is vitally important that even in these times when

resource is restrictive we continue to support the needy and vulnerable within our Borough. Poverty in the rural and urban areas is increasing among the elderly, the poor, and now to for those in work. To this end the Task Group supports the Councils efforts to attract new business to the Borough to provide jobs and increased prosperity. Through the year we must remain conscious of the difficulties many of our residents face and be prepared to intervene where necessary to alleviate strain on families and communities.

The delivery of the new Local Plan up to its examination is of high significance to the Council. It is crucial that the plan should pass as the proposed infrastructure; job creation and house-building schedule are all dependent on its success. The Task Group notes the importance of the success of this plan and supports all efforts to see it pass.

There are many pressures and risks associated with the budget this year. staffing pressures, resource allocations, and reductions in the government grants pose significant challenges to the authority. However, the Task Group has concluded that the budget for 2017/2018 is achievable and is balanced.

Cllr Brendan Chilton

Chairman Overview and Scrutiny Committee

ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL MANAGEMENT TEAM

Response to:

Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group 24th January 2017

Management Team on Thursday 19th January considered the recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group on the Council's draft budget for 2017/18. We are pleased that the budget is considered to be both legal and achievable, but would wish to comment on some of the recommendations, as shown in the table:

No	Committee Recommendation	Management Team Response	Proposed Action
II	Endorse the service plans and risk registers for each service	<p>This is the first year that specific service plans have been put to O&S Budget Scrutiny Task Group.</p> <p>We considered that it would give the BSTG Members a better understanding of the services' agenda, as well as their direction of travel and some of the service risk issues, thereby setting the budget in context.</p> <p>We hope that this has been a productive move rather than a diversion away from budget into service delivery issues. Some clarification back to Management Team from O&S, in order to clarify the benefits and whether it is worthwhile continuing this for next year's budget scrutiny, would be appreciated</p>	N/A
III & IV	Request that services include staff resource as a separate and individual risk; and enhance the consideration of staffing within the strategic risk register	<p>These related recommendations are welcomed by Management Team, particularly as staffing/resource levels within services was of concern to the BSTG throughout the course of the scrutiny sessions.</p> <p>The Council's performance monitoring does not highlight any downturn in outcomes as a result of this, but resourcing is something that Management Team monitors continually – both to maintain service delivery levels and because staff wellbeing is a priority.</p>	N/A
V	Require the PID process to be a compulsory first step for determining the viability of all	We have suggested that this recommendation should read, ' <u>Endorse the PID process ...</u> ' because Management Team decided to make this a requirement on the introduction of	Slight rewording of recommendation to - " Endorse the PID

No	Committee Recommendation	Management Team Response	Proposed Action
	Council projects	the programme management system as a necessary part of managing the process.	process as a compulsory first step for determining the viability of all new and proposed Council projects”
VII	Give greater consideration to cross-service and strategic interdependencies and the maintenance of an authority-wide skills register to build resilience and reduce dependence on external consultancy	<p>Although we would share concern about the use of consultants where other options have not been thought through, we feel our systems already check and validate the use of consultants. We also have some concerns about what this recommendation will achieve, particularly in the light of the PID process identifying interdependencies. Compilation of such a register will require a lot of staff resource in the early stages, and it will also need maintaining (because of staff turnover, undergoing training, etc.) and would then require capacity assessments of any suitably qualified or experienced staff, as well as the workload of the teams in which they currently sit.</p> <p>We are happy to discuss this further at Management Team level and perhaps offer some options which might resolve the BSTG’s concerns</p>	<p>Rewording of recommendation to –</p> <p>“Agree the need for further consideration of cross-service and strategic interdependencies, to be taken forward by Management Team in liaison with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee”</p>
VIII	Seek to continue the existing apprenticeship schemes in place across the Council and extend these where possible	Management Team supports the BSTG’s recommendation and would wish to endorse it. We would, however, also recommend extension of the graduate scheme currently in place across the Authority as it brings benefits to both services and to individual graduates.	<p>Slight rewording of recommendation to –</p> <p>“Agree to continue the existing apprenticeship and graduate schemes in place across the Council and extend these where possible”</p>

Management Team

20th January 2017