

BUDGET CONSULTATION - NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATEPAYERS

TUESDAY, 7 JANUARY 2020

PRESENT: Councillors David Renard (Leader of the Council) and Russell Holland (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Commercialisation, Education and Skills).

Swindon Borough Council: Mr Mick Bowden (Corporate Director of Finance and Assets).

Representatives of Swindon Non-Domestic Rate Payers: Vince Ayris (Vince Ayris Ltd), Roger Shakles (Sewcraft Swindon Ltd), Ian Durston (Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership), Olly Spence (First City Nursing), Di Powell and Rachael Youd (In Swindon Bid Co Ltd).

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor David Renard, Leader of the Council, welcomed the invited representatives of local businesses to the meeting and explained that the meeting was designed to give local businesses an opportunity to voice their views on issues impacted by Council spending and that may have direct or indirect implications for the local Business Community and the economy of Swindon. He referred to the impact of the general election on Central Government's announcement of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2020/21, resulting in a delay to the Council finalising the local budget.

2. Budget Management 2019/20

Councillor Russell Holland, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance, opened discussion by explaining that the meeting was part of the Council's statutory duty to consult annually with non-domestic rate payers on its budget proposals. He confirmed that the budget proposals were being finalised and would be presented to Cabinet on the 5th February 2020 and Council on the 20th February 2020 and advised that legally the Council had to produce a balanced budget. He referred to the Chair's comments regarding the delay in finalising the budget and drew attention to the pressures on the current budget. Councillor Holland referred to pressures not only being experienced against the budgets of Children's Services and Adult Social Care Services, but also across the Council generally.

Mr Mick Bowden, Corporate Director of Finance and Assets, referred to the budget report, previously circulated, which Cabinet had considered on 4th December 2019. He explained that the Council was coming towards the end of its current two-year savings programme and, as indicated in the report, officers were focusing on the development of a strategy to March 2024.

Mr Bowden expanded on the faced by Adult Social Care and Children's Services where the issue of demographic pressures, particularly the ageing population and the impact on the demand for adult social care provision, had to be addressed. He also referred to the pressures within Children's Services, particularly due to the

increase in demand for the support of children with Special Educational Needs. He confirmed that even though cost savings had been undertaken, the Council was focussing on its approach to the community in order to build in long term sustainability. He explained that these initiatives were being incorporated in budgets over the next four years.

The business representatives:

- Confirmed that Swindon businesses were aware of the pressure on the budget and enquired whether the Council was aware of any negative impact on town centre businesses following the publication of the 2020/21 budget.
- Enquired on:
 - The funding received from Central Government.
 - The actions being taken by the Council to reduce the current budget deficit.
 - How the Council was to be affected by the increase of the minimum living wage.
- Expressed their concerns regarding:
 - a) Future town centre funding.
 - b) The competition for town centre businesses from satellite business parks
- Made the following suggestions:
 - a) The need to review weekday/ weekend car parking charges to address the adverse financial impact on businesses and the Council's income revenue due to the decrease in footfall to the town centre in order stimulate business growth.
 - b) Recommend the introduction of a chargeable fast track lane at the recycling centre to enable customers to complete their site visit quickly.
- Confirmed that the reduction of footfall into town centres was a national issue and how In Swindon Bid Co Ltd was engaging with businesses to promote Swindon nationally.

The Chair, Councillor Holland and Mr Bowden responded to questions and comments put by the representatives at the meeting and advised that:

- The budget proposals were still being finalised but at this stage Council was not aware of any significant direct impact on Swindon businesses
- The Council's decision to introduce free parking on a Sunday in the town centre to help increase footfall in the area had an adverse effect on the Council's income generation.
- Data available did not evidence the success of the Sunday free car parking scheme.
- The Council welcomed suggestions by local businesses to increase footfall in the town centre and that it would be beneficial for proposals to be cost neutral for the Council, as the current free parking scheme had made a detrimental financial impact on the current budget.
- The Council would ensure the legality of any recommendations received.
- Whilst a grant for Adult Social Care had been received from Central Government, a long-term solution to address the increase in demand for Adult Social Care Services and Children Services was still a priority.
- Work was being undertaken to promote the town centre that included discussions with Historic England to develop a Heritage Action Zone to improve the linkage between the town centre and the Outlet village.

- The North Star development would include leisure related businesses.
- The Council was not expecting to see any significant changes to the revenue budget for the Town Centre team and that it was working with other organisations and partners to facilitate major projects in Swindon.
- Proposals on how to reduce the deficit gap were to be tabled at the next Cabinet meeting on the 5th February 2020 and that whilst the Council had a general reserve of £6.6m to cover potential issues that may arise during the year, it was not financially prudent to plan to use it.
- Consideration was given to wage inflation when setting the budget.
- 70% of the budget was apportioned to Adult Social Care Services and when pressures were made on one sector of the budget, additional actions in other areas would have to be taken to ensure a balanced budget.
- The vacancy savings as indicated in Appendix 1 of the Cabinet report related to a vacant position that had not been filled this year.

3. Conclusion of the meeting

The Chair thanked the representatives of the business community and non-domestic ratepayers for attending and hoped they found the meeting useful. He confirmed that the budget proposals would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration on the 5th February 2020 and that recommendations would then be made to the Council meeting on the 20th February 2020.

This page is intentionally left blank