

Council 9 December 2021**Leader's Report****BUDGET**

Other than COVID, which I will come to later, the most pressing business of the council at the moment is the preparation of the budget for 2022/23. The approach of the cabinet, which has been shared with group leaders, was to ask officers to produce a draft budget which would demonstrate a direction of travel in terms of reducing the deficit over the medium term taking into account, among other things:

- Savings which could be identified within the base budget without having a detrimental effect on core services,
- Specific transformation measures identified by the cabinet and senior officers, and
- The use of S106, CIL, and other restricted funds to achieve strategic objectives,

We are still waiting to find out how much our funding from government will be, which obviously gives us a major degree of uncertainty at this stage, but we expect to find this out before Christmas. We will then be in position to submit a draft budget to Scrutiny early in the New Year.

5Cs

We have been able to analyse potential savings better this year because we have brought the financial reporting function back in house. This was one of the core services of the council which were outsourced as part of the 5 Councils project. Councillors may know that one of the councils in this partnership, Mendip DC, is about to be subsumed into the new Somerset Council and the chief executives of the 4 remaining councils have written to the new authority to ask them to prioritise any decisions they might want to make about their future participation in order to give more certainty to the other partners.

ARC

Councillors will recall that I wrote to the Secretary of State on behalf of the council asking him to pause work on the Oxford to Cambridge Arc until he could give some clarity as to the purpose of the project. Along with the other local authorities along the Arc have dedicated a great deal of time and effort into working together with government as we were told that this was the best way to gain environmental and infrastructure improvements for the area. However, the Comprehensive Spending Review contained no provision for such infrastructure and last week's meeting of councils across the Arc was cancelled at short notice. It seems that there will be no more progress on this until the Levelling Up White Paper is published next year and so I have asked staff to limit their contribution to this to only essential work for the time being.

FOP

This makes our work in the Future Oxfordshire Partnership even more important. The Oxplan 2050 consultation has now closed and we are waiting for an analysis of the very large number of submissions which should be available early in the new year.

COVID

The situation regarding COVID is changing daily with the impact of another new variant to be assessed. The Chief Executive and I receive briefings from public health and the council is proceeding with caution. Even before last night's announcement from the government, council staff were once again asked to work from home unless there is a particular need for them to come into the office and masks are being worn. However, as councillors we are required by the government to attend meetings like this one in person.

This has been a difficult year for us all, worrying about our own health and that of loved ones. As a council, we think particularly of three of our own staff who have passed away this year, and who will be sorely missed by everyone.

I hope that most of you will be able to take a much needed break this Christmas and we are all grateful to those staff who will be working to deliver essential services to those in need.

Thank you and have a Happy Christmas.