

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY
(BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING MEETING)

23 FEBRUARY 2022

QUESTIONS ON REPORTS

ITEM 2.1: POLICY AND RESOURCES STRATEGY 2022-23: REVENUE BUDGET

1. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR GAVIN EDWARDS

The budget includes £4m contingency funding for temporary accommodation costs to cover increased pressure on the service. What is the council's long term plan for dealing with the increased demand for temporary accommodation?

RESPONSE

Over 3,400 households are in need of temporary accommodation – people are being let down by high costs and low quality in the private rented sector and by ongoing government cuts to benefits that would enable residents to make ends meet. There is a real human cost to London's housing crisis and we need to keep investing to keep people off the streets.

The service has been significantly affected by the demands on the service generated by the impacts of covid, both from an 'everyone in' perspective and the type and availability of property. The longer term plan to address the financial pressures in this area are centred around a process which will be delivered via a budget recovery board.

The board is chaired by the strategic director of finance and governance; the board members are the strategic director of housing and modernisation, director of resident services, and finance director, and is also attended by head of housing solutions, head of litigation, senior finance manager, RSM (RSM) risk assurance service risk advisory manager, RSM senior consultant, and BDO senior manager (public sector internal auditor).

The cabinet member for council homes and homelessness is kept up to date on the progress of the board and meets fortnightly with the strategic directors of finance, and housing and modernisation to discuss key issues and actions arising.

This is a task and finish board whose terms of reference are to review the landscape in which the service works both operationally and financially and to review the national and local policy framework in which this service operates.

Amongst a raft of workstreams underway, the budget recovery board is looking at our procurement of temporary accommodation, implication of no recourse to public funds (NRPF) cohort, issues related to rough sleeping, the numbers of single households in temporary accommodation, income and its collection.

There has been a broadly stable financial position over the last financial year, albeit still over spent as per the requirement for the extra funding.

The recently adopted temporary accommodation policy has started to be implemented, this allows the council to place residents outside the borough, and allows us to manage our duty to those in temporary accommodation.

The expectation is that the board will remain in place for about a year.

2. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR ELEANOR KERSLAKE

How will the additional funding for libraries be spent?

RESPONSE

We have continued our investment in libraries to ensure that libraries remain at the heart of our communities. The additional resources will keep all the borough's libraries open, accessible and providing a good quality service.

The additional £425,000 library revenue funding will be spent in a number of areas including, but not limited to:

- Ensuring that the borough's libraries can continue to enjoy the same operating model and hours of operation;
- Funding the new Una Marson library, on the Aylesbury estate, which is due to open in 2022.
- Enabling the continuation of the Kingswood 'Order and Collect' library service, running out of Seeley Drive.

3. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR RENATA HAMVAS

How will the anticipated income from the private rented sector licensing scheme be used to bring up the standard of living in the borough?

RESPONSE

As a council, we are committed to improving private rented homes by driving up the standard of living in the borough and the private rented licensing scheme is just one of the ways we will achieve this.

The income will be used to:

- validate safety certification submitted to confirm properties are safe to occupy
- ensure that the landlord has satisfactory funding and management arrangements in place to ensure the wellbeing of residents and that property standards are maintained
- inspect properties to confirm they meet licensing criteria and set conditions, i.e. adequate amenities for number of persons, property meets the minimum energy efficient standards

- inspect properties to confirm they meet standards under the Housing Act 2004, particularly in relation to fire safety
- undertake targeting interventions in Southwark to bring properties up to the required standards
- ensure we have a robust database of licensed properties and landlords operating in the Borough – this will assist with data sharing, i.e. the GLA Rogue Landlord database.

4. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR SUNNY LAMBE

How much funding will the council receive from government to cover the Energy Bill Rebate and what impact will this have on supporting Southwark households with the rising cost of living?

RESPONSE

The details of Government funding are still to be confirmed but the Council expects to receive about £17m and to provide support to more than 110,000 households living in properties in Council Tax Bands A to D.

Any help for residents to pay increased bills is welcome, but to put this into perspective the impact of successive increases to the statutory energy price cap means that from April 2022, Southwark residents face an increase in their energy bills of more than £800 per year compared with April 2021 – with more than three-quarters of that increase taking effect from April this year. Other costs are rising too and inflation is forecast to reach 8% by the spring.

The £150 rebate support falls far short of what is needed – especially among the borough’s lowest-income and most vulnerable households. The Council was able to provide support with energy costs for low-income households through the Southwark Energy Support Fund this winter, via the Government’s Household Support grant. The Government says it has no plans to renew the Household Support grant when it expires at the end of March.

We will continue to put pressure on Government to ensure there are sustainable and long-term measures in place that will tackle the rise of energy bills and the cost of living, particularly for our most vulnerable residents in the borough.

5. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR VICTOR CHAMBERLAIN

What targets has the council set for using the £25m climate emergency money in the capital programme budget? How is the council mitigating the fact that inflation is depreciating the value of this £25m as each day passes?

RESPONSE

The climate emergency is the challenge of our generation and Southwark Council is committed to leading the way in meeting this test. We have already committed to spending over £100 million, investing into projects that will get us to net zero by 2030.

The £25m referred to is only one part of the budget that is being used to tackle the climate emergency. Around half of this money is now allocated and will be spent as the projects that are set out in the council's climate action plan. The council will publish its annual progress report in July 2022.

The July update will reflect the recommendations of the citizens' jury, and further work that is being carried out to improve the actions and targets in the plan. By not allocating all money now, we are ensuring that we have resources available to meet any new priorities which come from the plan refresh and citizens' jury recommendations.

Inflation applies to all earmarked funds that the council holds. We do adjust earmarked funds to account for inflation, but will keep funds under review and can increase the size of funds should it be necessary.

6. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR WILLIAM HOUNGBO

What alternative services do service users have if lines 309, 310, 311 and 312 in the policy and resources strategy (PRS) appendix D cease to operate? How will this increase costs elsewhere, such as in statutory services?

RESPONSE

These services are important and valued. Our recent cabinet report made it clear that we were seeking alternative sources of funding to avoid any cuts to our education services. This includes those services for children with special educational needs and children with autism. We will not allow a scenario where these services are unfunded. If, for any reason, alternative funding is not secured these services will continue, as they are underwritten.

Our absolute priority is to protect our more vulnerable residents and frontline services from funding cuts. This is getting harder each year.

The need for these services arises from early diagnosis of autism locally in the NHS, and the council is committed to working with the NHS to help and support families well and ensuring they get the support, advice and care that they need. There will be no changes to these important services, which I know will be welcome news for local families.

7. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR HAMISH MCCALLUM

How much has the council invested into housing repairs between 2010 and 2021? How many housing repair requests has it received from tenants, by year, between 2010 and 2021? How many mould and damp repair requests has it received from tenants, by year, between 2010 and 2021?

RESPONSE

Expenditure on housing repairs between 2010 and 2021 was circa £334,000,000.

We take reports of mould and damp very seriously, and know the impact it can have on the wellbeing of our residents if not handled quickly. As the below requested data shows, damp and mould is reported in a very small percentage of our overall 55,000 property housing stock.

When Labour came to run the council in 2010, over 18,000 homes were in a state of disrepair and we worked hard to turn this around. By 2019 more than 98% of council homes had reached the Decent Homes Standard. Over the next four years we will invest over £400 million in our repairs and major works programme to keep our homes to the highest possible standard.

The below information is for repairs including heating and hot water to properties managed by the council, funded by the housing revenue account (HRA). These figures include works orders raised by staff following inspections as well as requests made by tenants, so will also include some planned maintenance e.g. gas safety checks.

Number of repair requests raised per financial year (1 April – 31 March) is as follows:

2010-11 – 219,958
2011-12 – 223,916
2012-13 – 193,637
2013-14 – 172,926
2014-15 – 153,139
2015-16 – 148,381
2016-17 – 142,632
2017-18 – 146,642
2018-19 – 176,019
2019-20 – 176,885
2020-21 – 162,112
2021-22 – 150,522 (to date)

The number of tenants making a report of damp via the contact centre is as follows:

2010-11 – no data, recording started in 2011
2011-12 – 1,222
2012-13 – 1,393
2013-14 – 1,870
2014-15 – 2,285
2015-16 – 1,901
2016-17 – 1,781
2017-18 – 1,486
2018-19 – 1,521
2019-20 – 1,597
2020-21 – 941
2021-22 – 1,294 (to date)

8. QUESTION TO THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRACY FROM COUNCILLOR GRAHAM NEALE

What funding has been earmarked to pay for any policies suggested by the citizens' jury?

RESPONSE

The council is expecting to receive the final report from the citizens' jury in early March. When we receive the report, we will consider all the recommendations and respond fully and consider how we would implement them. The recommendations will inform the refreshed climate action plan and strategy this summer.

There are a range of funding sources which the council can look to use to implement the citizens' jury recommendations, including a climate change reserve fund, the Green Buildings Fund and the £25m capital fund, around half of which is available to enable us to allocate funding quickly if required.

It is important to note that we will not meet our target of net zero by relying solely on council resources. The cost to the borough is around £3.92bn. While we will use our resources as effectively as we can to have the highest impact, tackling the climate emergency requires national action and the government needs to do more to fund the change that is required. We need to look for funding from private sources to reach our net zero target.