

SOUTHWARK COUNCIL

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

(BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING MEETING)

WEDNESDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2024

MEMBER QUESTIONS WITH RESPONSES

ITEM 2.1: POLICY AND RESOURCES STRATEGY: 2024-25 BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CLEO SOANES

Where are we seeing emerging cost pressures in the budget?

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

The government's disastrous mini-budget of autumn 2022 crashed the economy, resulted in astronomical inflationary pressures and pushed the country into a once in a generation cost-of-living crisis that persists to this day. Local government were not spared the consequences of these decisions, including increased costs for goods and services, as well as increased demand for support from residents. For Southwark, General Fund pressures are most acute in Temporary Accommodation, No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and Special Education Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Transport. The Council always looks to be cost efficient, but we will always go as far as we can to protect our residents and the services they rely on most. Therefore residents will see new commitments for these three key areas in this budget, so residents are able to continue to access these essential services.

2. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR YUCEF HASSAINE

Could the cabinet member explain the role of the equalities and human rights panel in providing feedback on the Budget proposals?

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

As a Council, we put equality and fairness at the heart of everything we do. Our Budget proposals are no different. The Equality and Human Rights Panel (EHRP) and the Forum for Equality and Human Rights (FEHRS) offer crucial scrutiny of the Council's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work. The EHRP is open to all in the borough who are interested in and/or work in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) related areas. The panel brings together a selection of community and voluntary sector groups who work with different equality groups, including those who experience socio-economic disadvantage. Ahead of the budget proposals, the EHRP submits written feedback to help inform the council's budget equality analysis work. The feedback is received both by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and by the Council's Cabinet, guiding how we shape the overall budget setting process.

3. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR KATH WHITTHAM

How much of a reduction has the Council seen in Government funding?

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

Local councils have faced over 13 years of damaging cuts imposed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Governments, with government funding for Southwark Council having reduced by two-thirds since 2010. Over the years, the government continues to pile on additional responsibilities to local government, all the while central funding dwindles. The impact of the energy crisis, surging costs on construction, repairs and maintenance, increasing demand and spiralling inflation has left local councils across the country in a difficult position. However, we are not deterred from our purpose of bringing local people the services they need and want. We will work hard to make sure every pound we spend for our residents goes further.

4. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR RICHARD LIVINGSTONE

What council tax support is available for low-income families?

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

Southwark will continue to have one of the lowest council tax rates in London, but we still have help available for those who need it. Families and households on a low-income can claim a reduction in their council tax bill of up to 85% through the Council's Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme. This scheme also provides a bill reduction of up to 100% for low-income pension-age households. For vulnerable low-income households who struggle to pay the reduced bill, Southwark offers a local welfare assistance scheme that provides discretionary additional support. Finally, young people aged 18-25 who were previously looked after by the Council do not have to pay council tax in Southwark.

5. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR NAIMA ALI

How much support has the council given to residents during the cost of living crisis?

RESPONSE FROM COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

While this country continues to be in the grip of a cost-of-living crisis, Southwark will not turn their backs on those who need our help. Throughout the cost-of-living crisis, we continued all forms of support, working closely with the borough's voluntary sector, faith leaders and Tenants and Residents Associations to make sure all residents who need help know where to go. In November last year, we set up a new Cost of Living fund for low-income households at risk of hardship, providing £100 vouchers for food, energy, and essentials.

By the end of the year, the Council will have distributed more than £40m in extra cost-of-living support to help those who have needed it since winter 2021/22. This expansive amount includes our free healthy school meal provision, which we have provided to primary school children for a decade and which we have now extended to young secondary school pupils in need. Almost all Southwark households at the bottom half of incomes received more than £200 in extra support.

A very low-income family with two school-age children could have received almost £1800 in extra support. While this government have turned their backs on those who need assistance, Southwark continues to pull out all the stops to ensure no one goes without.

6. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR MAGGIE BROWNING

How do we measure the climate impact of the budget proposals?

RESPONSE COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN

Southwark Council remain committed to take action on the climate emergency, which is a key priority for our residents and our planet. Therefore, through the budget process, we analysed the climate implications of each budget line in the proposal. This analysis determines if any changes to the budget will have a positive or negative impact on the council's overall emissions. Each line was rated with a 1 to 5 score, where 1 was significant positive impact and 5 was significant negative impact. A score of 3 indicated that the proposal had a neutral climate impact. Since conducting this process, we have looked into the best practices of other local authorities and the climate budgeting work ongoing at the GLA. We will learn from these examples to strengthen our analysis of budget climate impacts in future years, doing our part to end our contribution to climate change.