

SUPPORTING NARRATIVE FOR BUDGET PROPOSALS

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Overview

The department's vision is to make Southwark homes great places to live, where good services are delivered right first time. Linked to the council's Fairer Future promises, the department aims to boost investment in the housing stock, build new council homes at council rents and improve performance in all core service areas. We aspire to work closely with residents to deliver consistently high quality services, achieve better value for money and continue to support the most vulnerable residents, particularly those in temporary housing need.

The department delivers a diverse range of services funded from both the council's General Fund, and the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for landlord services, which cabinet considers separately from the General Fund budget. Activities are focused on:

- Ensuring council housing is warm, dry and safe including a kitchen and bathroom renewal programme.
- Delivering an improved and customer orientated housing repairs service, including an enhanced voids letting standard.
- Ensuring that homeowner charges are fair.
- Tackling fraud and ensuring that homes are allocated to those in genuine housing need.
- Increasing housing supply and reducing the use of temporary accommodation.
- Improving the customer experience and increasing digital service delivery.
- Delivering efficiency savings and improving value for money.
- Involving customers in the improvement and local management of services.
- Developing the department's equalities framework.

The primary areas for consideration are:

Customer Experience

The customer access programme aims to achieve improved customer services whilst at the same time delivering efficiencies. It aims to deliver this through electronic service provision; on-line service access and self service, and smart telephony. The large majority of council services are now accessible on-line, 24 hours a day and at the customer's convenience.

The opportunity to reconfigure and improve customer access and service delivery in the contact centre has generated £3.3m savings since the contracted-out service was brought back in-house in 2013 with a further £831k earmarked for 2015/16. Investment in on-line provision, particularly through 'My Southwark', means more customers can now self-serve and transact their business with the council digitally, rather than through traditional routes. The benefits of moving to new shop-front style My Southwark Service Points and rationalising office accommodation has generated greater efficiency (£205k) whilst raising customer satisfaction levels to 93%.

The division is also responsible for a number of other services, which also contribute to the savings proposals as follows: customer resolution (£160k), concessionary travel and registrars and coroners services (£90k) and housing options (£166k). The division also continues to support employment in the borough through its apprenticeship programme with the appointment of 12 new apprentices across the division this year.

Most recently, the housing portal available through My Southwark has enabled council tenants and leaseholders to view their rent or service charge accounts on-line and request a repair. These service access improvements also provide the opportunity to review and rationalise the opening hours for the contact centre. It is proposed to bring the service in line with most other London councils and to revert to a 9 to 5pm, Monday to Friday service, whilst providing an out of hours emergency service at all other times.

Specialist Housing Services

One of the most significant financial risks the council faces is homelessness and the upward cost pressure of temporary accommodation provision, particularly bed and breakfast. Southwark is recognised as a leader in homelessness prevention, but it is simultaneously facing challenges through rising demand and a reduction in the availability of accommodation. Hostels and estate voids in the HRA provide more financially neutral forms of temporary accommodation and these are utilised wherever possible to ameliorate the impact on the general fund. Further efficiencies (£206k) arise in operational running costs linked to modern ways of working and digital by default agendas; together with efficiencies in the private sector leasing schemes which have moved to being self-funding; and staffing efficiencies in reducing management roles whilst preserving frontline services. Additionally, measures are being taken to better manage demand, up-scale supply and discharge our statutory responsibilities through the private sector and registered providers. The demand-driven nature of the activity makes it difficult to predict the extent of the budget pressure that may occur, but this will be addressed by way of corporate contingency as required.

Community Engagement

The division delivers consultation and community engagement activities across the council that are about involving residents and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the decisions that the council makes, improving our services in a climate of reduced resources and getting residents involved in managing and delivering services where they are better able to do so. This is an integral part of the Fairer Future vision and the Council Plan, in particular working with local people, communities and businesses to innovate improve and transform public services.

The division supports the five community councils, works with tenants and residents associations across the borough, manages the relationship between the council and the voluntary and community sector and commissions services that support our most vulnerable residents. The key priorities include:

- Introducing resident housing inspectors.
- Introducing a new diversity standard to ensure that people from every community have their voices heard.
- Involving residents in the council's ambitious plans to build 11,000 new council homes.
- Supporting an independent Commission to enhance the vital work of the VCS.

The approach to the budget has been where possible to involve residents and the VCS to develop budget proposals that protect services and to identify where investment in preventative services can reduce demand on more costly crisis services further down the line. Despite the significant level of cuts in council funding over the medium-term, the impact on voluntary sector funding has been significantly less, but the severity of the impending cuts clearly make this position harder to sustain which presents a challenge for both the council and the role of the VCS going forward.

For 2015/16 the budget savings comprise:

- A reduction in the community capacity grants programme arising from two organisations having ceased to operate.
- Rationalisation of existing arrangements into a single service infrastructure contract for VCS support.
- Reprourement for the statutory provision of HealthWatch Southwark.
- Review and restructuring of support arrangements for community engagement, Mayor's office and community councils.

Housing and Community Services- Equalities Impact Summary

In developing budget proposals, the department remains committed to delivering efficiency savings that as far as possible protect frontline service provision. For 2015/16 a further £2.025m savings have been identified (c. 9%), through revised and more efficient working within the housing service and working more collaboratively across departments via streamlining back-office processes and structures, partnership working and investment in alternative service delivery models.

The drive towards greater operational efficiencies through service rationalisation and integration and moving towards more cost effective transaction routes continues apace and offers further scope for savings going forward.

Together with smarter procurement and rigorous contract management it has been mostly possible to protect service outputs albeit at reduced cost so far, but given the scale of reductions in central government funding it is inevitable there will be an impact going forward. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, impact assessments consider whether there are any disproportionate impacts on any particular groups and identify actions to mitigate these. Wherever possible budget proposals attempt to protect frontline services and therefore have a neutral effect including for those who share a protected characteristic under the Equality Act.