

Scrutiny of the Administration's Budget 2021/22

Portfolio	Scrutiny Questions on Portfolio 2021-22 Budget Statements
Leader – Cllr. Terry Richardson	
Additional Question 1	<p data-bbox="477 432 1926 496"><u>The Chairman, Cllr. Geoff Welsh asked all portfolio holders to start by providing a summation of their respective forthcoming budget:</u></p> <p data-bbox="477 531 622 563">Response:</p> <ul data-bbox="477 603 2029 1361" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="477 603 2029 699">• We were uniquely placed as a council to deal with this situation, finances were in good order, we were in a position to rise to the challenge, it has not been without difficulty and would like to thank all out staff who have risen to the challenge and have organised the community hub and business hub. <li data-bbox="477 707 1989 770">• We were able to weather the storm of closing our Leisure centres, and press the Govt. to provide funding to local councils who were in the 2nd tier, <li data-bbox="477 778 2029 842">• Going forward - the most uncertain year, we have a 1 year settlement, where we will have questions on the reserves and what we can use them for. <li data-bbox="477 850 2029 978">• We're in a good position with the reserves –its worrying that we have to set a 1 year budget and we can't look any further than that due to the uncertainty/unknown funding, New Homes Bonus could completely disappear in future years, with a loss of £1.6m to the Council, what will it be replaced with? Business rates are due to change – how will the benchmarks change and what impact will this have on the council? <li data-bbox="477 986 1727 1018">• Our priority is that we must plan as we have certainty, and adjust as we need to in response. <li data-bbox="477 1026 1926 1090">• We have spent additional money on recruitment, but we need to do this to keep looking forward, to meet the priorities in the Blaby Plan, Green Agenda, and keep on top of enforcement. <li data-bbox="477 1098 2029 1193">• I am positive about the way forward, but it will be extremely challenging, we don't have clear sight of our finances going forward, but we are concerned about our staff and the impact on them. But we are a strong, efficient, effective council that has a vision on the way forward. <li data-bbox="477 1201 1877 1233">• It may take us longer to achieve the things we wanted but we will grasp the opportunities available to us. <li data-bbox="477 1241 2029 1361">• I am very positive about the way forward but it will be extremely challenging. We're concerned about the impact on staff, but we are a strong efficient council. We will not be able to achieve things as fast as we probably would have hoped for, may have to slow things down, but will grasp at the opportunities as they arise. We need to be clear on our goals, but need to be realistic with what we can achieve.

1	<p><u>Democratic Services/Governance</u></p> <p><u>How do we ensure that decisions taken by the council consider the climate change strategy and its objectives?</u></p> <p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The report template has been amended recently – it needs embedding into to the culture of the council but we must be realistic - we can't do everything due to financial constraints. • Delivery of the Strategy will be monitored by the Portfolio Holder, the Senior Leadership Team and, should they consider it appropriate, the Scrutiny function of the Council
2	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>How is the authority building in resilience to ensure that staff are supported given the increased workload and the personal impacts of the pandemic?</p> <p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We hold SLT to account - they hold staff surveys regularly and we must ensure there is an open culture so officers feel they can express views • We check the establishment figures to ensure we have the correct number of staff, and don't overburden them with more projects • The Community hub have considered looking at using non- council support staff to support the hub to ensure that our own staff are not pressured • These are very difficult times for all staff; enormous change, increased demand and, different needs such as working at home, supporting the hub, as well as the pressures, shared by many of home schooling or, perhaps caring for others. As we endeavour to ensure that Blaby DC continues to be a great place to work, we recognise that each staff member is unique and, encourage them to talk to us about solutions which will work for them. • We offer a confidential counselling service should staff feel unable to talk to their manager. There are regular staff briefings and surveys to gauge how people are feeling and, how they feel they could be supported and, there is a mental health toolkit for all staff to access.

<p>3</p>	<p><u>General:</u> What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salaries for staff – biggest expenditure, however not in a position to consider this, we have the reserves we have, so we can plan in a structured way. We have looked at, considered and rejected reducing staff and investigated possible outsourcing, e.g. refuse, however this was rejected as our staff are experienced and we have seen where this approach has not worked at other councils. • Income generation – work on The Grange (former Natwest Bank) has commenced, looked at building more homes, but was rejected as we don't have resources. The Council has the ability to borrow money to spend on income generation schemes but the return on investment needs to be sufficient to warrant it. • We have made significant savings over the past 10 years – will listen to suggestions from staff and councillors • As we come out of the pandemic we will be a new council, we need to determine what this will look like, this includes considering investment in leisure centre
<p>Additional Question 2</p>	<p>Cllr. Geoff Welsh - as we come through the pandemic and lift restrictions, will you continue with supporting small businesses, e.g ability for cafes and pubs to do outside seating, will we seek a continuation of these planning discretions to allow small businesses to continue doing this?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>Where the delegated authority will allow us to do so, it will be continued – and we will have to give consideration to support we can give if there are not enough sufficient funds to enable it to happen. The portfolio holder will look at using the discretionary grants in the most effective way to support those small businesses.</p>
<p>Additional Question 3</p>	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown – within the budget where have you prioritised services, and what have you prioritised for the climate change agenda?</p> <p><u>Response</u> – recruited a Green Officer, other projects outlined by other portfolio holders and will be outlined through the year. Ongoing discussion going forwards about the funding we receive and the decisions we need to make. Lots of issues with a 1 year funding settlement.</p>

	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown – are you satisfied that services are running as efficiently as they can</p> <p>Response – the council is meeting the needs of what is required to meet the needs of the pandemic – all services are prioritising what needs doing so priorities have changed.</p>
<p>Finance & Assets – Cllr. Maggie Wright</p>	
<p>Additional Question 4</p>	<p><u>The Chairman, Cllr. Geoff Welsh asked all portfolio holders to start by providing a summation of their respective forthcoming budget:</u></p> <p><u>Response:</u> Priority is to come back and regroup with all teams and get clear picture where we are. Need a clearer picture on the financial position, especially council tax and business rates, estimating £1M financial gap but could be smaller – lots of uncertainty around this yet. New Homes Bonus is out for consultation, collection rates (residential/business) will be affected for years going forward. Pay award may be a different agreement. Relatively healthy reserves – but need to consider how they are replenished. May need to make difficult decisions down the line. Need to start our actions on the commercial strategy and the green agenda as well as considering the potential in the building and consider agile working.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p><u>Leisure Centre:</u></p> <p>What are your thoughts on the support we’re providing to the leisure centre during the pandemic, and any support needed going forward?</p> <p><u>Response</u></p> <p>Not a quick fix or sudden change, need to consider impact of covid. It is a major revenue income stream for the council, we are currently waiving the management fee of approximately £0.5M per annum as well as providing further support up to a cap of £204,000 as agreed by Council. We have been able to recoup some of our loss in income from Government by way of the COVID sales, fees and charges scheme, and have recently submitted a bid for £170,000 funding from Sport England’s National Leisure Recovery Fund, for which we await a decision. A further report will be brought to Council in April and will consider the position compared with the agreed cap this year, as well as any future funding requirement.</p>

5	<p><u>People:</u></p> <p>What type of risk assessment has been done in relation to resilience of staff in ensuring that services continue? What is the contingency if we need to buy in more staff? What options have you considered and what has been implemented?</p> <p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service specific risk assessments and plans • Additional staff brought in on a casual or temporary basis where needed • For example during the depot outbreak we temporarily stopped some services and used temporary staff to reinforce remaining staff to cover essential services.
6	<p><u>HR:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>How many staff have been furloughed?</u> Response - Blaby District Council has not furloughed any staff during the Covid pandemic • What has been the rate of sickness absence across all the Portfolio's/departments Response - The pattern of absence rates changed significantly from pre-Covid to the months following the first lockdown. Absence rates dropped significantly at the start of the March 2020 lock down. In the FY to end November 2020 absence rates were at 2.63%. Sickness absence rates due to Covid remain low overall at 11% of overall absence (1.7% to November 2020). This pattern is reflected in all the portfolio areas, even those where staff are not home working • How have we handled health and wellbeing over the past year? Response - Health and wellbeing for our staff has always been a priority for our staff and has taken on additional importance for everyone since March 2020. Our action have included: • Practical issues around social distancing, minimising transmission risks and the viral load of our working areas dominated the early part of the financial year and this has been constantly reviewed and updated as the year has progressed (including Corporate Covid Secure Risk Assessments). • Staff who were deemed clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable were supported to remain at home during the first lockdown and those who are CEV are continued to be supported to do this where needed • Support for staff's mental and emotional wellbeing has also been a key part of our Covid response; this has included regular updates on services that are available to staff, training for managers on how to support the

	<p>wellbeing of their teams and provision of advice and information through intranet updates and a new Wellbeing Newsletter.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The needs of staff and managers have been assessed through a number of bespoke staff surveys and we continue to meet and communicate regularly with our Trade Union colleagues who have helped us navigate the pandemic. • Individual risk assessments have been developed and introduced for staff working at home to support their physical work space and any wellbeing issues that may arise • All staff were offered flu vaccination vouchers (149 provided) • Individual risk assessments have been developed and introduced for staff who have additional risk factors • Financial support has been made available to support home working set ups
7	<p><u>Council Tax Recovery</u></p> <p><u>During the pandemic council tax recovery was paused, how much is outstanding, and do you have an estimated timescale of when the recovery service can resume?</u></p> <p>Response - Prior year debt is £2.4m for council tax and £0.7m for business rates. In year, we are about 1.7% down on council tax collection compared to the previous financial year, with about £5.2m still to collect. Business rates is about 4.8% down on the previous year with around £3.9m to collect.</p> <p>Serious consideration was given as to whether or not we should resume recovery action at what is a very difficult time for our residents. We have had to weigh up the potential negative press against the risk that the longer we leave it the more difficult it will be to recover the debt. On balance, therefore, we took the decision to resume recovery action several months ago. It is our belief that we owe a duty of care to those residents that are struggling to pay their bills, and that recovery action is a tool for opening dialogue and ensuring that their debt situation is not worsened.</p> <p>We attended our first virtual Court hearing for a small number of Council Tax cases on 1st December 2020 and we are issuing court summonses for 998 Council Tax accounts this week for a further virtual Court hearing on 16th February 2021. This court will focus on those Council Tax payers who haven't paid anything in the last 2 months.</p>
8	<p><u>Sustainable Investing:</u></p> <p>Sustainable investing can have a positive long term impact, has any thoughts been given to sustainable investing that the council may make?</p>

	<p>Response:</p> <p>We are governed by our Treasury Management Strategy in terms of the type of investment vehicles that we are able to use. However, this is something that we have discussed with our treasury advisors and, where applicable and compliant with our TMS, may be something that is considered going forward.</p>
9	<p><u>Reserves:</u></p> <p>The funding gap will be filled from reserves, will it be earmarked reserves or general reserves and how will this be determined?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>This is something that will be put forward with the budget proposals in February. Ordinarily it would be General Fund balances but could be a combination of that and earmarked reserves dependent upon what is deemed to be most prudent and appropriate in the context of the overall budget.</p>
10	<p><u>Savings:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p> <p>As Cllr Richardson has mentioned, we only have a one year settlement and it is difficult to predict whether future funding gaps will arise. We haven't specifically identified any areas of savings within my portfolio and as we go through the recovery stage we will be looking to revise the action plan within the commercial strategy to look at what income streams might be appropriate.</p>
11	<p><u>Loans/Borrowing</u></p> <p>Are there opportunities to borrow more to achieve what we want to achieve? E.g. investing in Bouskell Park, Fosse Meadows</p> <p>Response:</p>

	<p>This is something that will be considered as part of our capital planning process which will be brought to Council in February. Any borrowing must always be prudent, affordable and sustainable, in line with the Prudential Code, and whilst investment in our assets is important, we must always have regard to the ongoing financial impact on the revenue budget, and council tax.</p>
<p>12</p>	<p><u>Commercial Strategy</u></p> <p>How are we going to progress with the commercial strategy?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>We were about to develop the new action plan in April last year, having already achieved many of the actions that had been identified in the original strategy. Obviously the pandemic has had a major effect on being able to progress the development of a new action plan and we will work on this as 'recovery' starts to happen and we have a greater understanding of what is required and what may be achieved.</p>
<p>13</p>	<p><u>Assets:</u></p> <p>As skeleton staff are in the offices, utilities are still being used, as such what is the net impact of the cost to the council in running and maintaining the council offices? What measures are being taken to minimise this cost?</p> <p>Have used this opportunity to do maintenance, some fixed expenditure still stands, electricity, lighting etc. a small number of staff have still been coming in to use the building so have had to keep it open.</p> <p>We have however seen a reduction of a third in electricity because a huge number of staff are not in the building the installation of automatic lighting in the building has helped with this and individual thermostats on radiators have limited their use to those areas that are in use.</p>

<p>Additional Question 5</p>	<p><u>Cllr Nick brown – are you confident you have the provisions and contingencies in the budget</u></p> <p>Response – yes confident we have both, we’re working on what we know, so we have planned for this, but future is uncertain, especially when considering the SLM contract and the revenue income stream. Will continue to work with the S.151 Officer.</p> <p>Cllr Nick Brown – what is strategy for regrouping, any priorities identified?</p> <p>Response - Priorities are: Understanding the financial future i.e. what is the future funding streams from Business Rates, NHB and Council tax.</p>
<p>Corporate Services & Neighbourhood Services – Cllr David Freer</p>	
<p>Additional Question 6</p>	<p><u>The Chairman, Cllr. Geoff Welsh asked all portfolio holders to start by providing a summation of their respective forthcoming budget:</u></p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>Customer service – moving the team to enable them to work from home, and keep everything running was a huge task, we are looking at: mot testing, commercial waste/recycling/more online forms/green vehicles/social media – and recruiting more staff/partnership working, and enabling more staff to be able to work from home. Green garden bins has been a success - much fairer system. 1600 new bins were ordered.</p>
<p>14</p>	<p><u>Corporate Services</u></p> <p>During the pandemic majority of staff have had to work remotely, each being provided with I.T equipment. What impact has this had financially to the council and to the cost of ICT support?</p> <p>Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All existing laptops in the building used for homeworking, including the desktop computers • £20k was used to top up a few laptops and to purchase some equipment

15	<p><u>Corporate Services:</u></p> <p>With staff working remotely and the offices being closed to the general public, has there been an increased uptake in online services? And what is the cost of providing more online?</p> <p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – we have seen an increase in online services, pandemic has given a gentle push for residents to use digital services • Additional resource has been allocated for 3 extra members of staff to enhance the digital team • My Account: 38.5k accounts, up 32 % on the year, Contact Us form is up 21%, Bin orders up 32%, Benefits claims up 29%, fly tipping 57%, building control forms completed online up 19%. <p>Note: the above are figures of the increased % use of online reporting/access to forms.</p>
16	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitions for the team is to consider any savings and will utilise staff however we can.
Additional Question 7	<p>Question – are you looking at increase in the size of the car park at Bouskell Park</p> <p>Response – due to current circumstances, it has not been progressed yet, but is still in the process of being taken forward.</p>
Additional Question 8	<p>Question: - Electric vehicles, and new type of bins that are environmentally friendly,</p> <p>Response – bigger vehicles were replaced in 2020, we will be looking at electric/hydrogen vehicles – due to current circumstances we were unable to progress. The cost of machines is more than double of current vehicles. Wagons are £200k, and the electric version costs £0.5m. Refuelling infrastructure in depot would also need to be investigated. Small electric van are at the depot, however it manages a maximum range of up to 90 miles, but can reduce drastically with lights/heating usage. All options need to be investigated.</p>

Additional Question 9	<p>Question – increase of 57% in fly tipping - what is the impact in cost? What are the actions to reduce this? Cameras etc.</p> <p>Response: Environmental Health team are responsible for carrying out fly tipping investigations – the council does have some covert cameras, unsure of the number of investigations. Most rubbish is household/construction rubbish. The situation at Whetstone Tip - accessible only by an appointment which can takes a few days, has probably not helped the situation, and could in part be a reason for the high number of cases.</p> <p>In terms of cost, this has not been analysed to that level of detail, but further information can be sent to members.</p>
Housing & Community Services – Cllr. Les Phillimore	
17	<p><u>Community Services:</u></p> <p>How are we ensuring that we are delivering the most efficient and cost effective services to our most vulnerable residents during the pandemic?</p>
18	<p><u>Community Services:</u></p> <p>What was the financial impact on the council as a whole in delivering the Community Hub?</p>
19	<p><u>Council Tax Support</u></p> <p>During the pandemic there was a higher uptake of council tax support, what has been the net impact of this in comparison to the previous year?</p>
20	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p>
Health, Wellbeing & Regulatory Services – Cllr. Sharon Coe	
21	<p><u>Leisure Centre:</u></p> <p>We have put lots of money into the leisure centre, despite the gap in budget, should we consider whether the support needs to continue?</p>

22	<p><u>Climate Change/Green Agenda</u></p> <p>How are we prioritising climate change/green objectives in the budget? Have we considered whether a green commercial strategy should be adopted?</p>
23	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p>
Planning, Housing Strategy, Economic Development – Cllr. Ben Taylor	
24	<p><u>Economic Development:</u></p> <p>How can we best support businesses who may be affected by the Covid pandemic (e.g. pavement cafes, can this thinking be extended, making the best use of open spaces to be business friendly) what other innovative ideas are you considering and what is the financial impact?</p>
25	<p><u>Housing Numbers:</u></p> <p>How do we unlock the demand for housing that has been delayed by COVID to ensure ongoing financial support through NHB?</p>
26	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p>