

Scrutiny of the Administration's Budget 2021/22

Portfolio	Scrutiny Questions on Portfolio 2021-22 Budget Statements
<b>Leader – Cllr. Terry Richardson</b>	
Additional Question 1	<p data-bbox="477 435 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="477 536 622 564">Response:</p> <ul data-bbox="477 604 2029 1362" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="477 604 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> <li data-bbox="477 707 1989 767">• 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 2<sup>nd</sup> tier,</li> <li data-bbox="477 775 2029 836">• 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> <li data-bbox="477 844 2029 975">• 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> <li data-bbox="477 983 1727 1011">• Our priority is that we must plan as we have certainty, and adjust as we need to in response.</li> <li data-bbox="477 1019 1926 1080">• 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> <li data-bbox="477 1088 2029 1182">• 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> <li data-bbox="477 1190 1877 1219">• It may take us longer to achieve the things we wanted but we will grasp the opportunities available to us.</li> <li data-bbox="477 1227 2029 1362">• 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.</li> </ul>

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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>
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"> <li>• 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</li> <li>• We check the establishment figures to ensure we have the correct number of staff, and don't overburden them with more projects</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>

<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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• We have made significant savings over the past 10 years – will listen to suggestions from staff and councillors</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>
<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><b>Finance &amp; Assets – Cllr. Maggie Wright</b></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"> <li>• Service specific risk assessments and plans</li> <li>• Additional staff brought in on a casual or temporary basis where needed</li> <li>• For example during the depot outbreak we temporarily stopped some services and used temporary staff to reinforce remaining staff to cover essential services.</li> </ul>
6	<p><u>HR:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>How many staff have been furloughed?</u> Response - Blaby District Council has not furloughed any staff during the Covid pandemic</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 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:</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>

	<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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• All staff were offered flu vaccination vouchers (149 provided)</li> <li>• Individual risk assessments have been developed and introduced for staff who have additional risk factors</li> <li>• Financial support has been made available to support home working set ups</li> </ul>
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><b>Corporate Services &amp; Neighbourhood Services – Cllr David Freer</b></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"> <li>• All existing laptops in the building used for homeworking, including the desktop computers</li> <li>• £20k was used to top up a few laptops and to purchase some equipment</li> </ul>

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"> <li>• Yes – we have seen an increase in online services, pandemic has given a gentle push for residents to use digital services</li> <li>• Additional resource has been allocated for 3 extra members of staff to enhance the digital team</li> <li>• 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%.</li> </ul> <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"> <li>• Ambitions for the team is to consider any savings and will utilise staff however we can.</li> </ul>
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>
Additional Question 10	<p>Question – has any decision been made to increase fees and charges</p> <p>Response - There are no substantial increases to fees and charges for refuse &amp; recycling. (Note: the fees and charges schedule was included in the Cabinet report in November 2020)</p>
<b>Housing &amp; Community Services – Cllr. Les Phillimore</b>	
Additional Question 11	<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> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referred members to the foreword</li> <li>• The service works with businesses and individuals, holistic service, but very personalised and individualised</li> <li>• Key point – many businesses and people going through traumatic times and have a long way to go yet</li> <li>• As a result of the pandemic we know more about our vulnerable clients – we will use that knowledge to set our ambitions and goals for the future. We’re far more informed that we have even been.</li> <li>• The team have faced and met the challenges head on, and I congratulate them all.</li> </ul>
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> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key points – we’ve ensured that no one was homeless over Christmas and New Year.</li> <li>• The Revenues and Benefits team processed £2M in Business Support in one week (£16/17M in total of business support)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lightbulb – client facing to look at adaptations, they faced significant challenges to enter individual properties -they used Google Maps, looking at similar properties in the area/location to assess needs without entering the property</li> <li>• A new Housing Strategy is being developed</li> <li>• In March 2020 when the first lockdown took place this had an impact on how the Community Services Team could deliver their services, alongside this the establishment of the Community Hub meant we were seeing vulnerable people coming forward for assistance that had not contacted the authority for help previously. We have used our existing Community Services staff to support our most vulnerable residents with complex needs while using our community groups and volunteers to support those with less complex needs. Operating in this way has meant we have been able to maximise the support available to all our residents including those who were classed as shielded in the first lockdown and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable in the current lockdown.</li> <li>• We have also re deployed staff from other teams to support the delivery of the community hub as needed.</li> <li>• The demand data we have collected during the pandemic will be used to inform a review of the services provided by the Community Services Team to ensure we can continue to run efficient and cost effective services to our most vulnerable. This will include increasing our digital offer/self-service for those that can help themselves and greater use of our third sector and voluntary organisations. Thus ensuring that our support workers are able to help those considered as most vulnerable.</li> </ul>
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> <p><u>(Figures supplied)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food Parcels/Vouchers                      £9,150</li> <li>• Postage    £838</li> <li>• Grants to Volunteer Groups                £5,000</li> <li>• Backfilling secondment                      £538</li> <li>• Redeployment of staff                        £22,900</li> <li>• DEFRA-funded project                       £30,404 (External Funding)</li> <li>• <b>TOTAL</b>    <b>£68,876</b></li> </ul> <p>We used a lot of our own staff to cover the work of the community hub therefore the costs were kept to a minimum as we redeployed these staff from other areas that were not able to operate fully during the first lockdown.</p>

<p>19</p>	<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> <p><u>Response</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2019 – £3.8M was processed in council tax support</li> <li>• So far in 2021 – £4.1M was processed, of which £76K was due to changes in the council tax base rate</li> </ul>
<p>Additional Question 12</p>	<p>Cllr Geoff Welsh –what are the consequences? How do we start to recover?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confident that with all the changes due to Universal Credit, Council Tax Support, Resident Support, Discretionary Payments that the team will be able to step up and deal with it</li> <li>• We're dealing with a lot of uncertainty at this time</li> </ul>
<p>Additional Question 13</p>	<p>Cllr Geoff Welsh – have you thought about the kind of approach the council can take to maximise what we can do for the business community:</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly there are some concerns for businesses, however this question is best suited to the Economic Development Portfolio</li> </ul>
<p>Additional Question 14</p>	<p>Cllr Nick Brown – as the furlough position changes, including an uptake in the services provided within your portfolio, are you satisfied that you have enough capacity with the service to manage that?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>Yes - Revenues &amp; Benefits have processed an increase in payments and support and managed it with current team</p>

<p>20</p>	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>Now is not the time – our mission is to support our staff/residents/businesses to get through this pandemic. Once this over, then we need to look at all the information gained, and how we can shape the service.</p>
<p>Additional Question</p> <p>15</p>	<p>Cllr Sam Maxwell – with the reduction in Council tax support, and UC, have we considered what impact that will have on council tax support? Will there be an increase in council tax support following the changes?</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>Furlough has affected the case load whilst employees remain on 80% income this will not warrant a need to apply for council tax support. Furlough was intended to end in October 2020, an impact was expected at that point. Furlough has been extended.</p> <p>Covid hardship fund allocated to Blaby has topped up the difference between council tax support and Council tax liability by up to £150. At the 12 January the total value of council tax support hardship payments was £339k. This is funding directly credited to the council tax accounts without the need to collect this from the residents.</p> <p>Grahame Perkins – there is a lot of uncertainty, at some point the DWP will start up there original plan which was started in 2012, to start moving people across to UC, and that will have an impact, at the moment anyone who has a natural change in circumstance that may trigger that move to UC. So if people come off furlough as a result of businesses not being able to support themselves then they'll move onto UC rather than housing benefit, that will be a knock-on effect, then we'll have a council tax support claims, that we will support them with. We don't know how many people will be affected.</p>
<p>Additional Question</p> <p>16</p>	<p>Cllr David Findlay – how can we ensure that we're utilising the allocated DFG funding?</p> <p><u>Response</u></p> <p>There is about £1.1m needs allocating – we are constrained by the pandemic, we're in a lockdown and we need access to properties. National shortage of contractors. This is something that we will be looking at soon as possible.</p>

<p>Additional Question 17</p>	<p>Cllr Louise Richardson – Homelessness figures seems to be relatively low, what are the figures for affordable housing? Are we able to home people or putting them in hotels. Expected domestic violence on the rise, and the children’s workers service was closed</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Ian Jones –</p> <p>Yes there were low numbers in temp accommodation especially those in b&amp;b’s. As we shut down over Christmas we had no one in B&amp;B’s but we did have a few that came through over the break that were put in temp accommodation. In comparison with our neighbouring LA’s, we were at the lowest - we worked with our partners to assist us.</p> <p>New affordable housing- has been difficult to track as we get information on completions a few months after they have been completed.</p> <p>Rebecca Holcroft – Domestic Abuse we have our outreach workers and have seen an increase in referral since the start of the pandemic.</p>
<p>Additional Question 18</p>	<p>Cllr Paul Hartshorn – people are falling on hard times very quickly – we need to be able to help those people who need support for that time between falling on hard times and getting that support/payment to them.</p> <p>Grahame Perkins – DWP have taken on extra recruits to alleviate delays in payments. We also try to plug gaps and we can provide advance payments, we have our own funding for food banks.</p>
<p><b>Health, Wellbeing &amp; Regulatory Services – Cllr. Sharon Coe</b></p>	
<p>Additional Question 19</p>	<p>The Chairman, Cllr. Geoff Welsh asked all portfolio holders to start by providing a summation of their respective forthcoming budget:</p> <p>Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exceptional work by the Environmental health team</li> <li>• Tourism offer growing</li> <li>• Youth Council going from strength to strength -</li> <li>• Continuing work with our partners, befriending service ongoing, delivering on the community grants scheme,</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new Green Grant coming to Council – new initiatives to help support residents find greener solutions</li> </ul>
Additional Question 20	<p>Cllr. Geoff Welsh – Requested an update on the Bouskell Park car park extension.</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr.Sharon Coe – Initial designs to expand the car park have been completed, we are now awaiting cost evaluation to return to increase car parking spaces from 28-50.</p>
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> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>We are working closely with SLM to understand the financial picture and will continue to do so over the coming months. We will bring regular reports to council to update members on the financial position.</p> <p>We have submitted an application to the National Leisure Recovery Fund for £170, 000 to support our financial position in relation to the leisure centres.</p> <p>When the decision was made regarding the future of our leisure offer no one could have predicted we would be in these unprecedented times.</p> <p>All councils are in the same position it is not unique position to us.</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> <p><u>Response:</u></p>



## Climate Change/Green Agenda

How are we prioritising climate change/green objectives in the budget?  
Have we considered whether a green commercial strategy should be adopted?

I am pleased to say that our Carbon Neutral Action Plan is a focus in terms of what we will be delivering over the next twelve months. We have started off with some quick wins for example the electric charging points in all of our car parks which should be in place from April 2021 and for which we were successful in obtaining £95,940 of external funding and Blaby's contribution was £7,800.

The total amount in the Green budget for this year was £55,000 and we have £47k remaining. The reason why we have not spent a large proportion of this budget, is where possible we have looked into where we can access external funding to take forward the green agenda rather than using our budget.

As you can imagine when we start to look at reducing our own carbon footprint in our buildings and assets then we will need a budget that is far greater than the current budget allocation to look at progressing this.

## BEIS Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund

Our Green Officer has spent a lot of time looking at this in conjunction with Local Partnerships late last year. We were advised by SALIX finance who administer the fund that unless we have a clear business case and project plan with associated costings for energy efficiency improvements for our main offices there is little point applying. We will be looking to develop this going forward.

## LAD Phase 2

The MEH will be receiving a total of £59.95m of LAD funding as part of Phase 2 of the Local Authority Delivery (LAD) element of the Green Homes Grant scheme, which will run from February 2021 to December 2021.

The indicative capital allocation for Blaby is £405,000.

We have submitted a bid to DEFRA for £139,300 to support our air quality work if successful this will also help us develop a walk and ride strategy for the district.

	<p>Blaby is part of the LLR wide Green Group and through this group we are looking at where as a partnership we can bid for national green funds that are available, some of these Blaby would not be able to apply for on their own as we would be too small.</p> <p>We are in the process of taking a report to cabinet to secure funding to be able to extend our community grant programme to offer the opportunity for community groups to be able to bid for funding to undertake green actions such as installing an environmentally friendly boiler where they are looking to replace one or setting up a community orchard or allotments.</p> <p>The Council has a Commercial Strategy spanning 2018 -2021 and each year the action plan that sits behind it is reviewed. 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 impact 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. Of course, given that the Green Strategy had now been adopted by the Council, we will consider how the Green agenda can be reflected in that plan.</p>
<p>Additional Question 21</p>	<p>Cllr. David Findlay – Are there any plans to bring in more high-tech companies into the district in order to generate income / help the Green Agenda?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Sharon Coe- There is nothing we wouldn't consider, and we are exploring numerous options, however, we are still waiting to see how the situation unfolds post-pandemic.</p> <p>Teresa Neal – Our main focus in the current climate is keeping local / existing businesses within the district supported, however, we will still consider and be open-minded to new businesses within the area.</p>
<p>Additional Question 22</p>	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown – Where are the funds coming from for the new Green Grant? Is this existing funds or new money?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Teresa Neal: It has not gone through the governance programme yet; we are awaiting to go through Cabinet next month.</p>

	<p>Two options to be put forward for Cabinet are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That the current community grant is increased by £10,000 to enable the funding for the Green Grant.</li> <li>• If the first option is not applicable/accepted, then we will see what we can do within the current budget to incorporate the Green Grant.</li> </ul>
Additional Question 23	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown- Can you confirm how much will be carried over next year?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Sharon Coe and the S.151 Officer confirmed that £47,000 will be carried forward. Also confirmed that there is an existing £10,000 in current year budget.</p>
Additional Question 24	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown – Will the Business Plan require any additional resource?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Sharon Coe- It is a work in progress and is too early to predict whether extra resources needed, we hope that the current team can cover this.</p>
Additional Question 25	<p>Cllr. David Findlay – Has any of the groundwork started on looking at improving the layout of the offices?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Sharon Coe - We cannot predict what requirements we will need in the Council Offices post-pandemic, therefore hard to predict how the future will look.</p> <p>Teresa Neal – A Green survey has already been completed to analyse how we can make the building greener, but as previously said, we cannot predict future.</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>

	<p><u>Response:</u></p> <p>On numerous occasions we have looked at where we can work with other neighbouring authorities to run services on their behalf. Our Licensing Team Leader and staff have undertaken work for a neighbouring local authority for a short period of time as have our Environmental Health Team helped out with food inspections. Where the authority were happy for us to help out for a short period of time they were reluctant for this to be on a permanent basis.</p> <p>We have also made the offer to manage an authority's leisure offer as we have the same provider running our leisure centres but this was declined.</p> <p>In Building Control we are continuously looking at ways we can make savings and increase income, alongside the five partners we currently have within the Leicestershire Building Control Partnership we are also providing emergency out of hours cover for another local authority and have had interest from a second authority to do the same. One of our surveyors currently works 0.5 of his time supporting Lightbulb, his salary costs are met through the DFG funding which supports both the Building Control income levels and the Lightbulb performance.</p> <p>We continuously look at ways of making savings and increasing income but some of our ideas are not pursued as they would cost more to establish than we would generate in savings or income.</p>
<b>Planning, Housing Strategy, Economic Development – Cllr. Ben Taylor</b>	
<p>Additional Question 26</p>	<p>The Chairman, Cllr. Geoff Welsh asked all portfolio holders to start by providing a summation of their respective forthcoming budget:</p> <p><u>Response:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Plan</li> <li>• New Lubbesthorpe</li> <li>• Whetstone Pastures</li> <li>• Community Engagement</li> <li>• New Local Plan Briefing session being held on 1 February 2021</li> <li>• Potential garden village consultation</li> <li>• Business Hub</li> <li>• Glen Parva Prison</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kickstarter Scheme</li> </ul>
Additional Question 27	<p>Cllr. Nick Brown – Can current team cope with increase in workload demand?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Ben Taylor – It is more challenging working from home; however, we have managed so far with the help of additional consultants to attempt to shorten application processing times. If we do need any additional resources / staffing in the future, we will not hesitate to look into this.</p>
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> <p>A Business Hub was established to provide support to all of our businesses during the pandemic. Up until the 21st January it has dealt with 216 businesses, a number of these have come back several times for support. The website has been updated to reflect the information businesses have been requesting. We have provided regular updates through the business boost as well our colleagues in Environmental Health sending out sector specific information to our businesses.</p> <p>Our Licensing Team have worked with local café's to assist in them applying for pavement licenses should they wish to do so.</p> <p>Our Neighbourhood and Assets Team are looking to review the open spaces strategy this year which may enable more commercial opportunities at our parks and open spaces such as the coffee van at Fosse Meadows which has proved a very popular facility.</p> <p>We have paid over fourteen million pounds put in grants to businesses in the district.</p> <p>As you would expect the majority of the enquiries at the present time are financial ones where they are seeking advice on what support they can apply for.</p>

	<p>Where appropriate we are referring them to other funding and support opportunities through the Business gateway and LLEP.</p> <p>One of the areas businesses are requesting support for is to develop a digital offer for them, this is greater than just providing training on building a website it is the actual doing. We do not have the capacity to undertake this work at present, therefore would need to recruit specialist resource which would come at a considerable cost.</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> <p>Demand for housing is determined by various factors, most of which relate to the National housing market situation and are difficult to influence locally. A good example of this are the financial factors – stamp duty, the availability of finance, borrowing rates.</p> <p>All planning authorities across the country have seen a change in the type of planning applications submitted over the last 12 months; with an overwhelming increase in householder applications such as extensions. This is unsurprising given the pandemic and uncertainty over the housing market. We do not know at the moment whether this will continue; or whether when we move into the Covid-19 recovery period. This will change again as the housing market changes. In terms of ‘unlocking demand’, we can help with this by supporting the development industry to continue to provide a good supply of new housing. This will ensure that we can stimulate the housing market locally, as far as possible taking into account any National trends.</p> <p>Locally, in Blaby District, construction rates have stayed relatively stable over the last year; and there is still strong demand for new sites and development. The department is well placed to continue to support this, with work continuing on the new local plan. In addition, all ‘business as usual’ in relation to strategic growth and planning applications has carried on and will continue to do so.</p>
Additional Question 28	<p>Cllr. Geoff Welsh – More information on New Homes Bonus (NHB)?</p> <p>Response:</p>

	<p>Cllr. Ben Taylor – The NHB has been cut back, unsure of whether this will be available in future. During pandemic, we have kept building and construction rates still stable within Blaby District. Planning applications will continue to be looked at and processed as usual.</p>
<p>Additional Question 29</p>	<p>Cllr. David Findlay – In relation to Affordable homes and the local plan housing strategy , have we looked at the build to rent scheme ?</p> <p>Response:</p> <p>Cllr. Ben Taylor – There is 25% in the plan for affordable homes and the build to rent is a national scheme rather than a localised authority.</p>
<p>26</p>	<p><u>General:</u></p> <p>What scope for additional savings and income have you considered which you have then rejected and why?</p> <p>Savings:</p> <p>The department is involved in ongoing discussions with other, neighbouring, authorities, about the potential to make savings on local plan work. There is scope to do this through joint technical studies and even possibly joint plans. This continues, however we have struggled to secure commitment from other authorities to date; due to their various political concerns and difficulties. These discussions continue though, and we are hopeful that we will be able to accrue savings at least through a number of pieces of technical work.</p> <p>The department has made savings in mileage, printing, and posting costs over the last year, in line with the rest of the authority.</p> <p>We are continually reviewing our staff resources, however the work demands currently outstrip our resource. We have seen a huge increase in work over the last 12 months. Examples of this include a rise in planning applications and an increase in the number of key strategic sites we are involved in.</p> <p>Income:</p> <p>Planning application fees are Nationally set, and we have no ability to change these. However we have looked at a number of other areas for income, and continue to do so.</p>

	<p>We have, very recently, secured £50,000 a year through a Planning Performance Agreement to support additional resource; and will be looking at the best way to utilise this.</p>
	<p>Update from the S.151 Officer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Budget gap was forecast to be £1.1M, however due to £300k additional growth from Business Rates, the budget gap is now £800k (which does not include any increase to Council Tax)</li><li>• The budget gap may be closed further if Council Tax is increased by £5 (total £170k).</li></ul>