

# **Report of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee's Task and Finish Group:**



## **Budget in-year management, Budget planning 2025-26 and the MTFS**

April 2025

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## Foreword



This was the first year of trying a different approach to scrutiny of budget management in- year, as well as scrutiny of the budget for 2025-26 and the MTFS as they took shape. This felt like an improvement on the previous year when Scrutiny members did not see any management or planning information until December 2023, allowing little understanding of what options had been considered, what factors had been incorporated and what the impact of options would be on services and residents.

This year, because of the informal setting the task group workshops operated under, members were able to have sight of and understand the pressures being faced by officers, in delivering and planning budgets and make suggestions along the way.

Because of this, several issues of concern to members had been resolved by the by the time final proposals were in place so that in formal CISC meetings, members did not make formal recommendations to Cabinet in relation to the budget, which might suggest that scrutiny had little impact. I do not believe this to be the case.

Whilst I and my scrutiny colleagues accept that a degree of confidentiality is important, this should not be at the expense of transparency, which is key to effective scrutiny. The challenge possibly is due to resourcing and recording of informal discussions, and timing (i.e. when documents, like notes of meetings or options information can be placed in the public domain). Resolving this will ensure that the full impact of scrutiny can be acknowledged to the reassurance of the public, commissioners and officers alike.

I would like to thank those officers that took the time and effort to support this task group in 2024-25, recognise the benefits that scrutiny can bring to them, to all Councillors and, most importantly, to the residents we represent.

I hope that members and officers will continue to support scrutiny on its own improvement journey in 2025-26, and the relaunch of this task group in June 2025.

*Robert Stedmond*

## Executive summary and recommendations

This report sets out the work and conclusions of a task group of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC) that was launched at its meeting of [30 July 2024](#) and first convened in September 2024.

The recommendations in this report (Section 6) relate to the approach that scrutiny should take in 2025-26, based upon learning and experience of both members and officers from 2024-25 and with reference to the [Financial scrutiny practice guide | CIPFA](#).

The following recommendations have emerged in this report as follows:

The Scrutiny officer:

- a. To work with members and officers to find a way to record and track members' interventions proposed in an informal setting so that the impact of scrutiny can be formally measured and monitored;
- b. To agree with officers a means by which members can have earlier sight of relevant information for a workshop to give members time to absorb quite complex information before a workshop;
- c. To pre-plan workshops over the course of the year to mirror deadlines and milestones determined by the Director for Finance (**Fig 3** and **Appendix C**);
- d. To reach consensus with members and officers as to how members can have access to information not in the public domain at the time of the workshops in a way that reassures officers of confidentiality prior to options being formally adopted by the administration. This is important for effective scrutiny and of also of benefit to officers in their evaluation of options prior to adoption; and
- e. To work with the officer for member development, to source learning for roll out as soon as possible following Council in May 2025, particularly in relation to the development of the MTFs and Local Government Borrowing.

## 1. Introduction

Effective overview and scrutiny provides constructive ‘critical friend’ challenge and ensures the voice of the public is heard. It should be led by objectivity and evidence by people who take responsibility for their role and drive improvement in public services.

This report sets out the work and conclusions of a task group of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC) that was launched at its meeting of [30 July 2024](#) and first convened in September 2024.

The approach differed to that in 2023-24 and reflected a desire by both CISC and the new Director of finance to improve the ability of scrutiny to engage in budget management and budget planning in a deep more meaningful and timely manner that is not reliant on only documents in the public domain.

The Task Group met on 8 occasions, between September 2024 and March 2025. Whilst the task group made no formal proposals for CISC to make recommendations to Cabinet, the task group workshops offered finance and department senior managers an opportunity to gauge members’ concerns prior to production of final budget proposals.

The recommendations in this report (Section 6.2) relate to the approach that scrutiny should take in 2025-26, based upon learning and experience of both members and officers from 2024-25 and with reference to the [Financial scrutiny practice guide | CIPFA](#).

### 1.1 Membership

#### Councillors:

- Robert Stedmond (Chair);
- Christine Hulme;
- Frank O’Kelly; and
- Zaffar Ajaib.

#### Supported by:

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| • David Coleman-Groom     | Director of Social Care. People - Adults                           |
| • Michael Edley:          | Governance and Scrutiny Officer;                                   |
| • Andy Jeffs:             | Director of Revenues and Welfare Services, Financial Transactions; |
| • Lisa Keating:           | Director of Housing;   |
| • David McNamara:         | Interim Finance Director, Finance and Commercial                   |
| • Andrew Merritt-Morling: | Programme Manager, Transformation;                                 |
| • Annabel Scholes:        | Executive Director Corporate Resources (S151 Officer),             |

## 1.2 Terms of Reference

The broad terms of reference of the Task and Finish Group were as defined by outcomes in the Scope of work (Appendix A.) These outcomes were approved by CISC at its meeting on 30 July 2024 March 2024. Key to its scope was the opportunity to understand the challenges faced by departments in meeting in-year budgets and in planning for future budgets, the options open to departments in meeting those challenges and the impacts of those options on residents and the organisation.

## 2. Background

Local authority best practice is defined across seven overlapping themes (Fig 1) that reflect what most local authorities already do or are striving to achieve.

**Figure 1.** The seven best-value themes



As is the case for Slough (<https://www.slough.gov.uk/commissioners>), it is these themes that underpin the basis of the Minister's intervention in a failing council and inform the Commissioners' directions and subsequent assessments. Fundamental to SBCs journey out of intervention is its ability to reduce its debt and associated interest payments to enable it to meet the needs and expectations of its residents. It is 1 of the 5 corporate priorities for Slough BC (Fig 2) and is a key item in the CISC terms of reference. REF

**Figure 2:** The 5 Strategic Priorities as set out in the [Corporate Plan 2023](#).



### 3. Approach

The task group met on 8 occasions (See Table 1). Their meetings were workshop style and informal in nature. This was intentional to provide a 'safe' space<sup>1</sup> for Directors and senior managers to discuss issues, challenges, possible solutions, budget planning options and draft budget plans.

In this way it was possible for:

- Task group members to understand how budgets are formulated and modified as plans mature and contribute to the delivery of a credible balanced budget for Cabinet approval prior to being passed by Council;
- Officers to test ideas and gauge concerns of members as their budget planning options are evaluated before final proposals are agreed; and
- Members to make suggestions to officers, especially on the basis of their understanding of residents' issues and relevant community groups that might be helpful in implementation, communication or representation.

**Table 1: Task Group workshops and topics**

No.	DATE	TOPIC
1	18 September 2024	General overview of SBC financial pressures and challenges
2	2 October 2024	Overview of TOM projects: Deep dives into services with high financial impact
3	30 October 2024	ASC: Financial pressures, challenges & mitigations
4	20 November 2024	In-year Budget Management
5	8 January 2025	Temp Accommodation: financial pressures, challenges & mitigations
6	20 January 2025	Council Tax Support Scheme (CTSS)
7	28 January 2025	Final Draft Budget 2025-26 and MTFs
8	26 February 2025	CTSS Hardship fund

### 4. Impact of task group scrutiny

CISC made no formal recommendations to Cabinet with respect to In-year budget management or Budget proposals for 2025-26 and the MTFs and the task and finish group offered no proposals to CISC to do so. It was also disappointing that the Relevant lead Cabinet member failed to attend any of the public meetings where scrutiny of the budget was an Agenda item.

Confidentiality is important so that members can be assured that a number of possible options are considered in shaping a Budget and MTFs, some of which may be unpalatable.

Once an option has been adopted by the administration, then it is right that this decision can be open for scrutiny. It would not be appropriate, however, to scrutinise in public, those options that had been discarded during the budget development process.

Despite this, there is no doubt that, during the 8 informal task group workshops, members offered insight, comments and suggestions that officers welcomed and took into account as they shaped their budget plans. The detail of members' interventions, their potential significance, whether they were incorporated into plans as they took shape and with what impact, were not recorded by the Scrutiny Officer to uphold confidentiality of the discussions that took place.

An example of this is in relation to the Council Tax Support Scheme (CTSS): When this was initially brought to CISC in December 2024 ([Minutes 17 December 2024](#)), members expressed serious concern about some calculations relating to household income and about the Equality Impact Assessment, and asked that the final proposals be brought back to the Committee following consultation. (neither issue warranted formal recommendations to Cabinet). The final version of the CTSS was brought to the Budget task group on the 20 January, in advance of the Cabinet meeting (later that evening). On the basis of discussion in the informal workshop and taking advantage of the standing item for Scrutiny on the Cabinet agenda, the Chair of CISC attended Cabinet and requested that CISC have the opportunity to review the CTS Hardship Fund Policy before it came to Cabinet in March.

The task group held a workshop on the 26 February with the Director of Revenues and Welfare Services. Options for the criteria to be applied to the fund were discussed as well as the need for up-to-date data in roll-out. Members offered a number of suggestions to assist in roll-out of the Hardship fund and the director agreed to update members on progress of the rollout in September 2025.

Because of the informal environment in which the CTSS matters were discussed, an important aspect of valuable and impactful scrutiny will not enter the public domain, so that the full impact of scrutiny is not currently measured to provide reassurance that scrutiny is effective and impactful. It is fair to say that this is not unique to Slough but because scrutiny is a factor in the MHCLG intervention, transparency of scrutiny activity and impact is important to its journey to Best Value.

This presents the scrutiny officer, members, directors and senior managers with a dilemma: How to maintain a 'safe' environment for open and honest discussion whilst at the same time find a way to record and track members' interventions so that the impact of scrutiny can be measured?

## RECOMMENDATION

## **5. Reflections by task group members and officers.**

Members of the task group and finance officers were invited to share their reflections on the last year of budget scrutiny.

### **5.1 Reflections of task group members**

Members were given the opportunity to record their reflections in a simple survey (Questions and responses in Appendix B). In addition members passed on their thoughts in informal conversations. The following key points were made:

- Budget scrutiny was considerably better in 2024-25 than during the previous period;
- There is more to do;
- Members would welcome earlier sight of relevant information for a workshop as it was difficult to absorb quite complex information when first presented at the workshop.

**RECOMMENDATION**

- The workshops need to be better spread out throughout the year closer to real time activities/milestones;
- Need to resolve the need for members to have access to information not in the public domain at the time of the workshops in a way that reassures officers prior to options being formally adopted by the administration. This is important for effective scrutiny and of also of benefit to officers in their evaluation of options prior to adoption.

**RECOMMENDATION**

- Members would appreciate further learning, particularly in relation to the development of the MTFS and Local Government Borrowing.

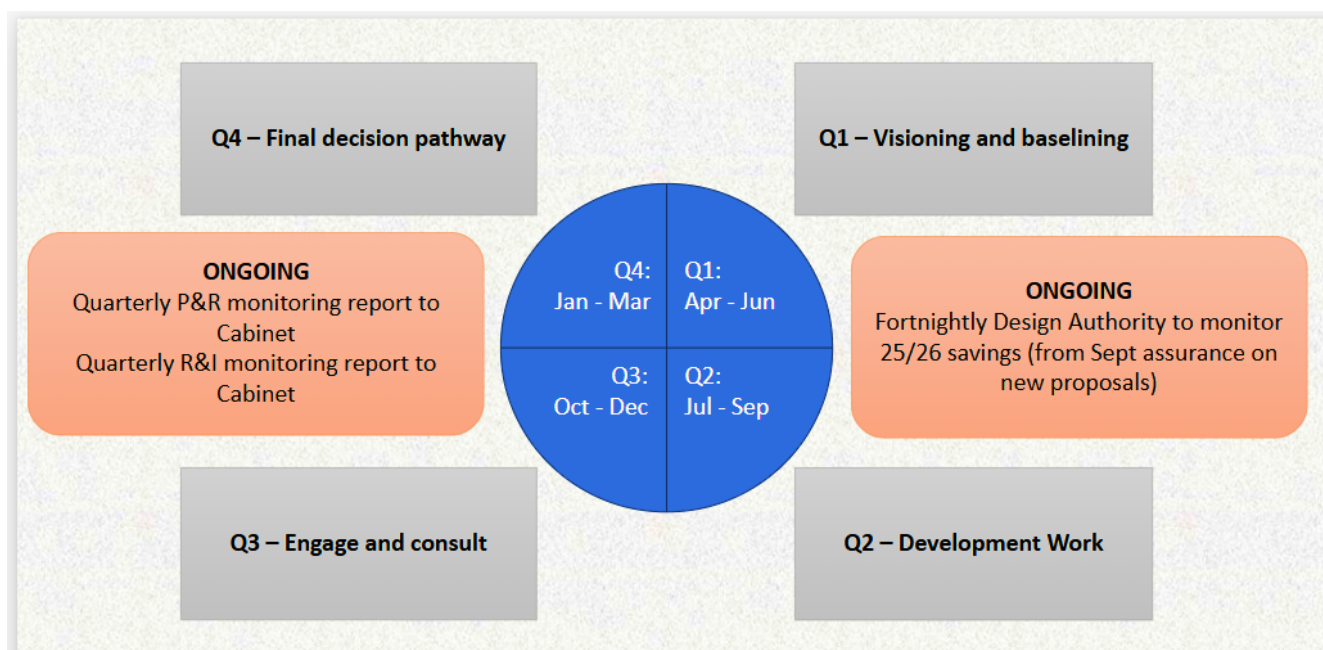
**RECOMMENDATION**

### **5.2 Reflections of finance officers**

The Budget Task and Finish was established for monitoring the 2024/25 programme and the 2025/26 Budget Setting and MTFS process. The process will take some time to become embedded and for everyone (members and officers) to become acquainted with the process such that officers can appreciate what members are hoping to achieve and support them in the most effective way.

Having gone through the process once it would be helpful to reflect on how it can be improved going forward. The budget setting/MTFS is an annual cycle as set out in Figure 3, below. For 2026/27 the development of the MTFS will be aligned to the Council's Corporate Plan. Figure 3 divides the annual cycle in to 4 quarters through the year that reflect the planning, development, engagement and decision-making elements of the plan.

**Figure 3: Annual Budget setting/MTFS cycle**



The cycle is supported by Cabinet reports throughout the year. Appendix C lists the Cabinet reports that support the Key Finance Milestones for Budget Management 2025-26 and Budget planning 2026-27.

## 6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusions

A different approach to the scrutiny of in year budget management and budget planning was adopted for 2024-25. This was by appointing a task and finish group that would operate throughout the year through informal workshops where information, (not in the public domain) about overspends, underspends, savings and thinking about budget plans for the following year, would be available to members of the task group. This would serve to assure members that for example a range of options were being considered and that the impact on residents was being considered.

There is no doubt that this new approach was significantly improved in comparison to the previous year, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Director for Finance and her officers.

Whilst no formal recommendations to cabinet were forthcoming, the task group made suggestions and comments that officers found useful and incorporated into budget plans.

It is important that, in 2025-26, a mechanism is agreed by which these interventions can become part of the measure of the impact of scrutiny.

Five recommendations for CISC to address in rolling out budget scrutiny in 2025-26 are listed below in section 6.2

### 6.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged in this report as follows:

The Scrutiny officer:

- f. To work with members and officers to find a way to record and track members' interventions proposed in an informal setting so that the impact of scrutiny can be formally measured and monitored;
- g. To agree with officers a means by which members can have earlier sight of relevant information for a workshop to give members time to absorb quite complex information before a workshop;
- h. To pre-plan workshops over the course of the year to mirror deadlines and milestones determined by the Director for Finance (**Fig 3** and **Appendix C**);
- i. To reach consensus with members and officers as to how members can have access to information not in the public domain at the time of the workshops in a way that reassures officers of confidentiality prior to options being formally adopted by the administration. This is important for effective scrutiny and of also of benefit to officers in their evaluation of options prior to adoption; and
- j. To work with the officer for member development, to source learning for roll out as soon as possible following Council in May 2025, particularly in relation to the development of the MTFs and Local Government Borrowing.

## Appendix A: Terms of Reference

SCRUTINY TASK GROUP: SCOPE & PROGRESS REPORTING			<b>Slough</b> Borough Council
TOPIC	Scrutiny of Budget Management and Budget Planning	UPDATED	17 April 2025
<b>SUMMARY:</b> To ensure that CISC is given the opportunity to carry out better financial scrutiny, propose real-time improvements to the budget and MTFS development and in year budget management and feed into subsequent annual cycles.			
<b>Scrutiny Officer</b>	Michael Edley	<b>Steering Group:</b> Regular (monthly?) informal meetings of small member group (Panel), to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>review delivery against existing savings targets / budget</li> <li>input into budget-setting discussions</li> </ul> Schedule when, in the year, the panel will be involved in budget-setting discussions	Members:
<b>Project Lead</b>	lead finance officer who will provide materials, agree the agendas with the Chair (Dem Services will do the admin) and build a relationship with the group, assisting them to understand the information.		
<b>Strategic Lead</b>	Annabel Scholes	<b>Other stakeholders</b>	CLT, Cabinet, audit committee

Outcomes	Objectives	Outputs
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Councillors will have a greater understanding of the council's financial arrangements and situation and key factors driving variance in 24-25 budget and implications for MTFS	Review of factors that inform/drive future service need or options to manage demand; How is service co-dependency / contingency measured, assessed & managed.	Reporting back to the main committee (primarily in the form of 'to note' items), providing assurance that members are involved in the detail.
Recommendations to CISC for topics/areas arising where issues of substance which need closer attention by the main committee	Monitor the council's financial position in-year (and the MTFS) via the finance information being submitted to cabinet, CLT, DMTs	Finance need to define what materials the group would regularly see – finance outturn information, savings targets data etc
Recommendations via CISC to assist with the development of the budget and MTFS and final review of draft Budget and MTFS		CISC agenda reports
Recommendations in relation to Communications to residents about Council finances and impact Evaluation of scope for meaningful public consultation		
Make recommendations about how best to do financial scrutiny in future years		Annual report and plans for budget scrutiny 25/26
<b>In Scope</b>	<b>Out of Scope</b>	<b>Critical Success Factors</b>
Value for money Benchmarking with nearest neighbours Does saving benefit the saver/service.	Funding formula?	Granularity of information Access to relevant in-department discussions

## **Appendix B: Reflections from task Group Members**

Two of the four task group members completed the survey

**Q1: Please provide your reflections on your involvement in the task group, what went well and what might need to improve.**

We need to improve the delivery times of the reports to the task group. It was difficult to get involved without timely and quality reports.

The meetings needs to be better spread out throughout the year closer to real time events

**Q2: Are there specific aspects of Local Government Finance that you are uncertain of and where training might be beneficial.**

MTFS and Borrowing

**Q3: If you are aware of any training that is available that you think would be of value, please provide information (such as a web link) below.**

Respondents skipped this question

## Appendix C: Key Finance Milestones for Budget Management 2025-26 and Budget planning 2026-27

Within the cycle there will be set public reports to Cabinet and these are due to happen as follows:

	<b>Cabinet Dates<sup>2</sup></b>
2026/27 budget and MTFS refresh	16 June 2025
Q1 monitoring report	14 July 2025
TOM Progress update and implications to MTFS	14 July 2025
CTSS proposal	15 September 2025
Cabinet - report on fees and charges	20 October 2025
Q2 monitoring Report	November 2025
Consultation on TOM and budget report	17 November 2025
Budget consultation signoff	15 December 2025
Report on CTSS	15 December 2025
Company Business Plans	15 December 2025
Provisional finance settlement (MHCLG)	17 December 2025 ( <i>tbc</i> )
Council Tax Setting	19 January 2026
Q3 Report	23 February 2026
2026/27 Budget	23 February 2026
<b>Council</b>	26 February 2026

Task and Finish group meetings can be better supported with advance scheduling of workshops to align with the proposed corporate planning cycle (Fig 3) and the above schedule of Cabinet meetings.

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<sup>2</sup> To Be Confirmed at May 2025 Council