

Cumulative equality impact assessment: Wokingham Borough Council, Medium Term Financial Plan 2023-26 Revenue & Capital Budget

Introduction

Purpose

Wokingham Borough Council is committed to embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion in all aspects of its operations and decision-making. The purpose of this cumulative equality impact assessment is to evaluate the potential impact of the proposed budget for 2023/24 on different groups of people protected by the Equality Act 2010.

The council's approach to equality ensures that where needed, equality impact assessments (EqIAs) are undertaken to support the decision-making process. A cumulative equality impact assessment differs from this usual process as it seeks to assess the impact of all of the budget proposals in combination with each other, rather than looking at each in isolation. This helps our decision makers to consider the overall impact of the budget proposals, including any unintended consequences, and enables the council to take action to mitigate any compound negative impacts.

Public sector equality duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) is a legal requirement for public sector bodies to actively consider how their policies and practices impact different groups of people protected by the Equality Act 2010. The duty requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different groups.

The protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010 are Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion, Sex and Sexual Orientation. As part of its commitment to [Tackling Poverty](#), Wokingham Borough Council includes consideration of socio-economic inequality in equality impact assessments undertaken to support council decisions.

The Public Sector Equality Duty supports good decision-making by ensuring that the potential impact of policies and practices on different groups is considered before they are implemented, and that actions are taken to address any negative impacts and promote equality and inclusion.

A cumulative equality impact assessment is not a statutory requirement, but it is a useful tool to support robust decision making.

Equality Plan & Strategic Priorities

The council's [Equality Plan](#) sets out our commitment to promoting equality and inclusion in everything we do as an employer, provider and commissioner of services, and as a local leader. The Equality Plan sets out three priorities: to Listen to and learn from our communities and use this to deliver services that work well for everyone; act on our commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion in the way we plan, deliver and shape our services; and to build a diverse and engaged workforce, where everyone is respected. Delivery of our equality plan is supported by the council's annual equality action plan. This sets out how the council will continually work to improve our own processes and practices to ensure we embed inclusion across the business of the council, as well as through our work with partners. The production of a cumulative impact assessment to support the council's budget setting process forms part of this improvement activity.

Approach

Assessing the impact of our budget savings proposals on equality is an ongoing process. Currently, the analysis is general and indicative. As specific proposals are refined and put into action, they will undergo additional examination to determine whether a full equality impact assessment is needed.

For the purposes of this analysis, all savings proposals set out within the MTFP 2023-26 have been subject to an initial equality screening. This screening identifies whether each proposal is considered likely to have a disproportionate impact on protected equality groups. If the screening has identified that there is a risk of a negative impact for a savings proposal for the 2023/24 financial year, full equality impact assessments have been conducted where appropriate or recommended where proposals will be developed and subject to further decisions by our elected members. Proposals for subsequent years will be subject to further scrutiny within the budget setting process for that financial year.

For proposals with staffing implications, equality impact assessments will be carried out prior to a restructure.

Equality Profile

Wokingham borough is a vibrant and sought-after semi-rural region located in Berkshire, with a population of 177,502. The borough has a higher proportion of adults between the ages of 35 and 54 (nearly 30%) compared to the England average (26.4%), and a lower proportion of younger adults (17% compared to 21.8% across England). 17% of the adult population is aged 65 or over. The 2021 census found that 24% of households in Wokingham reported at least one person with a disability, significantly lower than the national average for England and Wales at 32%.

The 2021 census also revealed that 80% of the Wokingham Borough population identifies as White, including 'White Other', 2.4% as Black African/Caribbean/British, and 12.9% as Asian/Asian British. The Annual Population Survey of 2020 highlights that the most ethnically diverse community within Wokingham is among those aged between 20-24 years, where 31% of residents belong to ethnic minority communities. 44.7% of the borough identifies as Christian, 37% as No Religion, 4.8% as Muslim, 4.8% as Hindu, and 1.7% as Sikh.

The [Wokingham Borough Equality Profile](#) provides further information about the borough's demographics and how they relate to protected equality groups.

Investing in our services 2023/24

Costs are increasing for the council as they are for everybody else. Various factors such as inflation on contracts, heightened demand resulting from demographic shifts in the need for services, and reductions or cessation of government funding have exerted further strain on the council's budget. To alleviate these pressures, certain areas of the budget will experience growth, resulting in a net positive impact on those utilising the services, particularly among children and young people, older individuals, and individuals with disabilities.

Fees and Charges

A review of fees and charges for council services and facilities is undertaken annually. This covers a broad range of activity from licensing to exercise classes. Any proposed increase in fees and charges for services used by residents is considered likely to disproportionately impact lower-income households. Though not considered individually prohibitive there is a risk that fee increases can add-up for some individuals or families, generating additional financial pressures. There is a further risk that due to heightened vulnerability to the causes of poverty, any such impact could disproportionately fall upon the protected characteristics of sex (a greater proportion of lone parents are women) and disability

(greater likelihood of increased living costs and barriers to employment). In considering the cumulative financial burden, frequency of use, breadth of services accessed by individuals and families, and the degree to which services might be considered essential, are important factors, alongside the proposed changes to fees and charges.

The schedule of fees and charges for 2023/24 shows a standard 7% increase, and details where increases differ from that due to specific service requirements or changes. The increase in most cases is below the current rate of inflation (CPI 10.5%). Services for residents are optional and of those contained within the schedule, the Sports and Leisure services and facilities are likely to be those most frequently accessed by individuals and families. Some services set out concessionary rates in relation to age, disability, or other factors. Fees proposed for a number of leisure services, such as those delivered at the countryside activity centre, are significantly lower than 7%. It is considered therefore, that the potential cumulative financial impact described above is likely to be low. Nonetheless, the council is taking proactive action to support residents who may be struggling due to the cost of living crisis, and is committed to long term action through its Tackling Poverty Strategy.

There are also several services included within the fees and charges schedule that meet the needs of or are more likely to be utilised by particular cohorts including children and young people, older people, and people with disabilities. Any increase in fees and charges to such services will result in a direct but individually minor adverse financial impact on those groups. However, where proposed increases are to meet cost of service provision, there is a positive anticipated impact as the fee increase enables sustainable delivery of that service.

Savings Proposals 2023/24

Equality screenings have been undertaken for all savings proposals for 2023/24. A number of the proposed savings generate an income for the Council or have other positive impacts on residents and communities.

The following proposals have been identified as potentially having a minor or moderate adverse impact on protected equality groups. Many will require further equality impact assessment as the proposals develop to ensure that any negative equality implications are considered and mitigated where possible, and that opportunities to advance inclusion are maximised.

Adult Social Care

Practice changes to reduce placement costs.

The proposed changes to placement practices with the aim of reducing costs may have an impact on the protected characteristics of Age and Disability. Therefore, an Equality Impact Assessment will be conducted to ensure that any formal changes to policy do not discriminate against these groups.

Extra Care - Decommission Background Support

The proposal envisages a change in the model of delivery for support for the council's extra care facilities. At present, support is provided 24 hours a day and is available to those with no or low care needs as well as those with significant care needs. The proposal sets out a targeted model of support which removes the on-site offer for those with no or low care needs. It is considered that this could have a negative impact on the protected characteristics of Age and Disability. However, in mitigation of this impact, alternative forms of support are available for those with no or low care needs including emergency, out of hours alarm service, ensuring that these customers can continue to access support

suitable to their level of need. A separate equality impact assessment has been conducted to support this decision and will be updated as the proposal progresses.

Childrens Services

Alternative Delivery Model for Children's Centres

This proposal is to review activity and collaborate with partners and other agencies to deliver cost effective yet engaging services at the council's Children Centres. Any change of service is likely to impact women and children (protected characteristics of Age, Sex, and Pregnancy and Maternity) and the proposal will need to be subject to further equality impact assessment as it develops. Consideration will be given to the equality profile of customers of the service to ensure that any negative impacts or opportunities to promote equality are identified and acted upon.

Chief Executive's

Effective use of Council owned Community spaces.

This proposal is to create improved community spaces across the borough by more efficiently using council assets and facilities to yield savings, meet local needs, and achieve positive outcomes. It is likely that this could result in changes to the current activities or locations of those activities that are currently held within those community spaces. This could result in a low or moderate negative impact across a range of protected characteristics. It is also likely however, that positive impacts can be delivered through this review, particularly with the focus on localities. A robust equality impact assessment will be undertaken to inform the review being undertaken and subsequent development of any changes proposed as a result of the review.

Reduce frequency of Borough News

The proposal is to reduce the frequency of the council magazine 'the Borough News' from three issues per year to one issue per year. This is likely to have a minor negative impact in relation to those who may struggle to access council news through digital means. Older people, people with disabilities and those on lower incomes can be at a greater risk of digital exclusion. An Equality Impact Assessment has been conducted to inform this proposal, with consultation undertaken with affected groups. Mitigating actions to enable those affected to continue to access essential council news and information will be undertaken in line with the results of this consultation.

Organisational Foundations Programme

The council has established an Organisational Foundation Programme (OFP) to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to generating efficiencies. There are a number of workstreams: Assets, Contracts, Customer Excellence, and Workforce. Each is supported by an overall equality impact assessment and specific projects within each programme will be required to undertake detailed assessments as the work of the OFP continues to develop. Ongoing support is also provided by the council's Inclusion Team.

Place and Growth

Increase Garden Waste Service annual fees by £10

Any increase in council fees or charges is likely to have a greater impact on lower income households. However, the Garden Waste Service is an optional service, and the impact is considered to be minor.

Stop the annual purchase and delivery of food waste caddy liners to households

This proposal to stop the provision of free food waste caddy liners to households could impact lower income households and could disproportionately impact larger households including multigenerational households. However, the impact is considered to be minor and free alternate methods of lining food caddies are available. Mitigating actions could include promotion of these alternate methods.

Increase in Off Street Parking Charges

The council proposes to increase off-street parking charges. At present charges are below that of neighbouring boroughs and have not been increased for five years. As a semi-rural borough, consideration is needed of the impact of any such changes with respect to accessing town centre facilities, alongside availability and cost of alternative means of transport such as public transport. The increase in parking charges could have a minor negative impact on lower income households, however, provision for disabled parking will not be affected. There is a statutory period of notice required for a change in TRO and comments received during this time will be taken into consideration.

Introduction of On Street Parking Controls - 100 spaces per year for next two years

The addition of on-street parking controls will also require consideration of accessibility of town centre facilities and is likely to have a low negative impact on lower income households. The Blue Badge scheme ensures that there is no adverse impact of this proposal on people with disabilities.

Charging leisure users at Carnival Car Park

Carnival Pool Leisure Centre users are currently entitled to two hours of free parking. This proposal is to remove that concession and apply parking charges. An Equality Impact Assessment will need to be undertaken to inform development of this proposal, with consideration given to users of the centre who may currently be accessing facilities for free – such as free swimming of those over 60, and for whom the cost of parking could be prohibitive.

Reduce the community engagement team by 2 posts

This proposal is to remove two vacant full time equivalent posts from the community engagement team. The community engagement team undertake a range of activities with different community groups, including groups which impact children and young people, older people, and maternity and breastfeeding groups. A full equality impact assessment is being undertaken to inform this decision as it progresses. At present there are no negative impact anticipated by the removal of vacant posts but moderate adverse impacts would be anticipated if the removal of these positions resulted in a change of service provision.

Removal of discretionary concession funding for transport on football services

This service enables qualifying residents to access free one-way travel on “football Special” bus services to Reading Football stadium. Payment is required on a return journey back into the borough. At present, this means that a concessionary pass holder for this special service only has to pay a single fare to travel to and from the football grounds. This proposal is to remove the funding for this, requiring those residents who hold the concessionary pass to pay a full return fare, rather than a single fare for the return service. The direct “football special” bus service will still operate. The removal of this funding will have an adverse impact on those on lower incomes who qualified for this concessionary pass (i.e older people and those with a mobility impairment who are eligible for free bus travel). The impact is considered minor as travel to the grounds can still be achieved via free (non-direct) services and the financial impact on individual residents of continuing to use the direct service is not considered significant.

Resources and Assets

Rationalisation process of Corporate Accommodation

This proposal forms part of the activity being undertaken within the Assets workstream of the Organisational Foundation Programme and will be supported by equality impact assessments as needed. It is likely however, that if there are any changes with regard to assets that are currently utilised by staff or accessed by members of the public that there could be adverse implications for equality groups across the protected characteristics and that consideration of the user profile of any assets will be needed as part of this process.

Penalty charges - Non provision of Information Council Tax/benefits

Legislation permits a penalty of circa £70 (council tax) and £50 (benefits) to those customer who do not tell us about a change in their personal situation. The council applied this charge pre-covid and this proposal is to reintroduce this charge. There is no direct impact on low-income households as the charge is only relevant where the customer has failed to inform the council of a change in circumstances. However, it is important to note that where customers have a compelling reason for failing to inform the council, the decision to implement a charge would be reviewed.

Summary & Cumulative impacts

There are 55 savings proposals for 2023/24 (a further 10 proposals are set out in the MTFP for delivery in subsequent years). 36 proposals were deemed to have no adverse equality implications at this time, and 18 were considered likely to have a minor or moderate impact. Of these, it was considered that 6 proposals required an equality impact assessment at this stage. For a further 14 proposals, Officers will be expected to undertake new or update existing equality impact assessments as the proposals are developed and further formal decisions are required to determine implementation.

The table provided in Appendix 1 sets out a summary of the anticipated adverse impacts of the savings proposals for 2023/24. It is considered that these could result in the following cumulative impacts for our residents.

Age & Disability

There is a small number of proposals that could result in an adverse cumulative impact for the older people and disabled people, in particular proposals relating to services provided for adults with care needs. There are further proposals that could, depending on how they are progressed result in additional negative impact for disabled people, including the reduced frequency of the council magazine. However, there are sufficient individual mitigating actions in place to address these risks and this will be kept under review as these proposals progress.

Socioeconomic inequality

There are a number of proposals that support income generation which will have a positive impact on residents, communities and service delivery. However, there are clear impacts for low-income households in the borough of increased fees and charges. This cumulative impact is considered minor with regard to the proposals that are included within the 2023/24 budget. Nonetheless, the council is committed to tackling poverty and supporting our residents through the cost-of-living crisis and will continue to review the cumulative impact of any increases to charges to our residents.

Conclusion

In light of the above, the proposed budget saving proposals are considered reasonable and have shown due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Although initial equality screenings have been undertaken to ascertain potential impact, many of the proposals are in their formative stages and are still to be developed and or subject to consultations. Consequently, as the proposals are developed further equality impact assessment will be undertaken to assess the relevance to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Table 1: Adverse impact across protected characteristics

| Proposal | Age | Disability | Gender Reassignment | Marriage and Civil Partnership | Pregnancy and Maternity | Race | Religion | Sex | Sexual Orientation | Socio-economic inequality | Mitigation |
|---|--------|------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|----------|-------|--------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Extra Care - Decommission Background Support | Medium | Medium | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Alternative support services available |
| Policy changes to reduce placement costs | Medium | Medium | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Effective use of Council owned Community spaces | Minor | Minor | Minor | None | Minor | Minor | Minor | Minor | Minor | Minor | Mitigating actions to depend on changes proposed. Significant opportunity to identify opportunities to promote inclusion. |
| Organisational Foundation Project - Assets | Minor | Minor | Minor | None | None | Minor | Minor | Minor | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Reduce number of Borough News Editions from 3 to 1 | Minor | Minor | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | Alternative options for accessing information and news, with targeted print as appropriate. |
| Alternative Delivery Model for Children's Centres | Medium | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Charging leisure users at Carnival MSCP | Minor | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Increase garden waste service annual fees by £10 | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Increase in off street parking charges | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |
| Introduction of on street parking controls - 100 spaces per year for next two years | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |

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|--|--------|------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|----------|-------|--------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Reduce the Community Engagement Team by 2 posts | Minor | Minor | Minor | None | Minor | Minor | None | Minor | Minor | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses, consideration to be given to how best to support community based activities and groups |
| Removal of discretionary concession funding for transport on football services | Minor | Minor | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | Alternative indirect free travel is available. Minor financial impact to continue to use direct services. |
| Stop the annual purchase and delivery of food waste caddy liners to all households | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | Promotion of free alternatives |
| Rationalisation process of Corporate Accommodation | Medium | Medium | None | None | None | None | None | None | None | Minor | To be identified as proposal progresses |

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