

Highways and Transport Committee

Date of Meeting:	22 nd September 2022
Report Title:	Review of Highways Ward Member Budget Scheme
Report of:	Tom Moody, Director of Highways and Infrastructure
Report Reference No:	HT/42/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To propose a policy for a revised ward budget scheme based on experience gained and lessons learned, to be implemented for 2023/24 onwards.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. In line with the Council resolution this report summarises the background to inception and results of the initial period of the ward budget scheme, including issues raised and lessons learned.
- 2.2. From the issues observed and feedback offered, a review of the way forward with highways ward Member budgets was deemed necessary and a summary of the key points considered is as follows;
- What has been the level of engagement in the scheme?
 - How successful has the current administration process been in terms of supporting the schemes objectives?
 - What are the lessons learned from the first two years of the scheme?
 - What is an appropriate budget per Member per annum for the scheme?
 - Considering the above, how should a policy on ward Member budgets be progressed going forward?

- 2.3. Based on the above the report then sets out a preferred option and its benefits to implementing a revised scheme for the next 4 financial years.
- 2.4. The proposal provides an uplift to the individual annual ward budget of over 50% from the current £4,200 per annum.
- 2.5. The proposal would equate to an uplift in the total annual ward budget to £553k from £370k (+£183k). The balance of these monies would have to be found from the current highway capital allocations contained in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- 2.6. The report also seeks to align the proposed revised approach to the themes coming out of the analysis of responses to the recent Highways satisfaction survey.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That the Highways and Transport Committee resolve that the following proposals are adopted as the new policy in relation to the ward Member budget scheme;
 - 3.1.1. That the annual budget per Member is increased to £6,500 per annum.
 - 3.1.2. The revisions to how the scheme is administered, as set out under Section 8.1 of this report are implemented.
 - 3.1.3. That the revised scheme operates for a fixed 4 year period with delivery commencing in April 2023.
- 3.2. To approve the re-allocation of a maximum of £255k underspend from the initial 2 year allocation to the ward budget scheme to those initiatives as listed under paragraph 9.2.8 of this report.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. To clearly set out the revised framework for a highways ward member budget scheme, applying lessons learned.
- 4.2. To enable greater efficiency and hence increased value for money in the delivery of the ward member budget scheme.
- 4.3. The adoption of this proposal would align with the Cheshire East Corporate Plan 2021-2025 aim of being 'A thriving and sustainable place' under the priority 'A transport network that is safe and promotes active travel'.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. The Committee could choose not to extend the ward budget scheme beyond the initial 2 year period however this would not be in line with the resolution from Full Council.

6. Background

- 6.1. During the debate on the MTFS for 2021-25 at the council meeting of 17th February 2021, the following amendment to the budget resolution was proposed and approved;
- ... to establish devolved ward member highways budgets of at least £4,200 per Ward Member for the financial year 2021/2022, with the proposal to be funded from the current allocation of Capital Grant funding to the Area Highway Groups of £350,000 and that the Committee System review achievements of the ward budgets scheme in 2021/22 with a view to widening the scheme in 2022/23 and beyond with a significant increase in the budget amount to be allocated to each Ward Member.*
- 6.2. Subsequently a detailed proposal was developed in line with the Council resolution, reallocating budget from the former Area Highway Groups to the ward member budget scheme. This funding comes from the Local Transport Plan highway capital grant from the Department for Transport (DfT).
- 6.3. The Council has previously determined, including in its returns to the DfT that this grant funding is spent on improvements to the highway and transport networks within the borough. The ward budget 'pilot' scheme was developed to be consistent with this requirement. It should be noted that officers were in a position of having to interpret a Council decision with minimal guidance from the DfT due to the impact of the Covid pandemic and that there had been no pre-work in terms of setting a clear policy and system for the operation of the scheme in advance of the Council resolution.
- 6.4. The Ward Budget scheme has been termed as a 'pilot' in the context of a trial of the administrative processes which underpin the delivery of the ward budget scheme, rather than a trial of the principle of having a ward budget scheme in its own right. This is in line with the original resolution on the basis that a review was proposed and approved in order to understand the scheme's achievements. This highlighted areas of potential improvement to these processes.
- 6.5. The scheme was initially developed for ward Members, but given the nature of the highway works under consideration, applications from any Town and Parish Council have also been considered. These organisations would be able to use the same mechanism to deliver schemes that they could commit to funding either in full or by working with the relevant ward Member.
- 6.6. Briefings were rolled out and all ward members and representatives of all Town and Parish Councils were invited.
- 6.7. The Highways & Transport Committee received an update on the ward budget scheme at its meeting in January 2022 with the intention that a final

report will be submitted to the committee in September 2022 with recommendations on how to deliver and manage the scheme in future years.

7. Overview

- 7.1. In the last and current financial year, ward Members were each individually issued £4,200 to spend on highway related issues within their ward. These amounted to a total budget of £370k inclusive of a circa £20k allowance for staffing costs relating to administering the scheme.
- 7.2. During the early stages of the scheme, enquiries were initially slow in being submitted but started to pick up following a series of reminders sent to Members by Cllr Browne and more recently the Interim Head of Highways.
- 7.3. Ward budgets have been able to be spent on a variety of highway assets or maintenance activities and so far, successful schemes have included street lighting upgrades, footway patching, carriageway patching, additional road signage, replacement road name plates, drainage works and road markings.
- 7.4. The original deadline of 30th June 2022 for applications was subsequently extended to 15th July. The reason for a deadline for applications was as follows;
- To ensure that adequate time remains for the assessment and delivery of the works.
 - To have a defined end date, to enable a review of the scheme to be undertaken, which is required in advance of budget setting for 2023/24.
- 7.5. As at 12 September 2022 progress on the applications received is as follows

:Progress on formal applications:	No. of Schemes
Delivered	18
Programmed for delivery	15
Currently being designed / costed for quotation	52
Received and awaiting assessment / Member meeting arranged	4
Checks for policy compliance underway	0
Declined - not policy compliant	11
Declined - insufficient budget (or rescinded on same basis)	21

Declined - schemes already in Highway Service core programme	16
Total No. of Schemes To date	137

- 7.6. Although there have been 137 formal applications there have been a much larger number of informal enquiries raised which have needed to be responded to. The officer time to service the current application led process has been significant.
- 7.7. 48 applications (35% of all applications) were declined on the basis of being either non policy compliant, unaffordable or already on the highways work programme.
- 7.8. The restrictions on how the money can be spent (i.e. on highway activities only) has led to representations from some Members who thought these monies could be used to fund wider public realm type initiatives such as park benches or provision of litter bins, for example.
- 7.9. Some Members have been disappointed with the level of funding available especially given the size of their wards, as this can limit their ability to deliver any meaningful works.
- 7.10. In summary therefore the following issues have been observed during the initial duration of delivery of the ward budget scheme:
- The scheme has not seen a full take up by all Members, as a result of the above the allocated 2 year budget will not be spent and hence will require re-allocation in year.
 - The scheme as designed with a formal application process is administration heavy both for the Members and the delivery team.
 - As applications can be submitted at any time, together with the existing demands on the Service, this makes accurate work programming difficult and has led to frustration by Members at the apparent lack of progress in getting schemes delivered.
 - Similar to the above the more ad-hoc nature of works means that there is very limited availability for the Service to proactively look at “buying in bulk” i.e. collecting specific elements of work funded by the ward budget scheme in to larger scale programmes.
 - In specific cases there are known highways defect issues which have been reported to the Council but are overlooked for other initiatives of lower value to the Council’s highway asset.
- 7.11. It should however be noted that there are a number of examples where a good outcome has been achieved, working collaboratively with ward Members.
- 7.12. Therefore there is a clear need to consider opportunities as to how to address the issues observed at paragraph 7.10.

7.13. The Highways Satisfaction Survey, which was sent out to Members, Town and Parish Councils, recently closed and whilst analysis is not yet complete a number of themes have emerged.

- Defects are reported potentially several times over an extended period (up to 3 years) which when assessed on a wider highway asset management basis are only of a low to very low priority.
- These defects are generally those which are seen as locally important, in particular to the Town and Parish Councils.
- The lack of ability to effectively collate these “low asset priority, high local importance issues” and place them into a work programme to give certainty around when they will be addressed, has a direct impact on levels of customer satisfaction.

7.14. Therefore, there is a clear opportunity to consider how we combine the ward Members budget and addressing the feedback gathered through the satisfaction survey.

7.15. There is also however a clear picture that based on the lessons learned there is a need to refine the approach focussing on these improvements exclusively on highways and not seeking to expand the scope of work beyond this at the current time.

8. Preferred Option

8.1. Whilst addressing the key shortcomings of the current system and retaining Members ability to influence what works are undertaken the suggested preferred option is as follows;

- Uplift the current £4,200 per annum ward budgets to £6,500 per annum from the Highways capital budget over the next 4 years, commencing on 1st April 2023/24. Please note commentary under section 9.2 of this report.
- Cheshire East Highways develop a rolling 2 year look ahead programme of work for each ward which is based on valid highway defects reported by the relevant Member and the related Town and/or Parish Councils through the Fix My Street or MES systems. These programmes would be lower priority work not already contained on existing highways work programmes but raised due to their local importance.
- This 2 year rolling work programme is then issued to each ward Member for approval with an offer of a 121 discussion should they so wish. Members would then have the ability to re-prioritise specific items of work within their ward programme, as they saw fit.

- These work programmes would be issued to Members in advance of the start of next year's work programme i.e. as part of already established highways contract business planning process, so provisionally mid-January 2023.
- In advance of each of the subsequent years making up the 4 year period (again provisionally January) a review would be offered to all Members, informed by new data, allowing any re-prioritisation of the remaining years work programmes as they felt was appropriate.
- Members may however choose to accept the work programme proposed "as is". For any wards whose Member do not respond within a set timeframe the proposed annual works list for their ward would be implemented by default.
- It is recognised that there is the potential for a number of new Members post the May 2023 elections who may wish to review priorities within their ward. The proposal therefore is to have for 2023/24 only a further round of direct engagement with new Members only with the purpose of reviewing their ward works list, provisionally mid to late June.
- It is considered that the above measures alongside an increase of staffing resource attached to managing the scheme will streamline and enhance performance related to the overall administration of the ward budget scheme.

Benefits

8.2. The benefits to this revised approach are as follows;

- Members will retain the flexibility to prioritise / re-prioritise the work at the start of each year and whether to spend their allocation equally over the 4 years, combine multiple years or fellow Member ward budgets to deliver larger value investments.
- Avoids the current situation of applications being voided on the basis that they are either non policy compliant or are already being delivered within the committed Highways work programme.
- This gives some level of timescale certainty to have these locally important issues addressed, often lacking at the moment due to their relative low priority in many cases – in direct response to a key theme coming out of satisfaction survey feedback.

- The process would allow a known quantum of work to be programmed from the start of each year rather than trying to fit in ad-hoc as and when Member applications are received and validated. This would make delivery of the Member budgets more cost efficient and generate increased value for money.
- We have the data available already in our reporting tools i.e the Fix My Street system to create the ward programme works lists so this would offer a much less administration heavy approach of developing valid work programmes.
- We would have much greater certainty around budget spend each year, as removes reliance on receipt of valid Member applications to be able to do so.
- Frees up resource both Highways Client and CEH to focus on other Service delivery issues.
- A positive impact on reducing the number of defect reports / repeated defect reports if this group of customers can see that the works are programmed.
- It directly links back to one of the themes coming out from the now closed Highways Customer Satisfaction Survey – closer engagement with Members and our Town and Parish Councils, hence demonstrates how we are listening to their concerns and taking action to address.

9. Implications

9.1. Legal

- 9.1.1. The Council has a duty under the Highways Act 1980 to maintain the highways network within Cheshire East. The proposal shifts more funding away from the core highways maintenance programme and it has been noted that this may in time affect the Council's status as a Band 3 authority. The risk is that should the Council cease to be classified by the Department for Transport as a Band 3 authority it would see its funding decrease on an annual basis.

9.2. Finance

- 9.2.1. The proposal equates to a 50% + uplift in the annual ward budget available to each Member.

9.2.2. The proposal would equate to an uplift in the total annual ward budget to £553k from £370k (+£183k). The balance of these monies would have to be found from the current highway capital allocations contained in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Hence other area(s) of highways investment will have to be reduced to allow this, areas which will be proposed as part of a highways budget paper to Committee in early 2023.

9.2.3. At present it has not been determined where these funds would be reallocated however it is proposed that for the first two years the additional funding for the scheme is 'top sliced' from the Council's own additional highways capital investment.

9.2.4. A number of risks are relevant to the proposed 4 year duration which Members are advised to take in to consideration when considering the recommendations, notably;

- The known 'static' Local Transport Plan capital grant settlement from the Department for Transport (DfT), thus providing the Council with a level of certainty on future funding would extend only to year 3 of the scheme;
- Recent communications have shown that the DfT are looking to steer more towards "performance" influencing capital budget settlement £values with likely initial impact from 2024/25. It is not clear how this will work at present with a consultation to follow, but the risk is that DfT settlement decreases;
- Conclusion of the current tranche of additional Council capital investment midway through the 4 year period, hence removing any ability to smooth out other grant funded budget changes;
- Members will still be able to roll budgets over to accrue or combine ward budgets to fund larger schemes but now over a longer period and hence the potential for observed underspends is greater if a large proportion of members choose to do this.
- The proposed 4 year period goes beyond current MTFS so will be subject to a further approval as part of the Council's budget setting for 2023/24.

Increased Value for Money

9.2.5. It should be noted that the revised approach is intended to make the ward budget scheme more efficient from a delivery perspective allowing

earlier planning and programming of work, rather than the somewhat ad-hoc nature of the current system.

- 9.2.6. This will also enable the Council's delivery partners to make more effective use of funding via integration of the delivery of these smaller value works into larger programmes.

Budget Reallocation

- 9.2.7. Members are advised to note that due to the reasons contained at paragraph 7.10 there is a maximum £255k underspend from the first two years of the ward budget scheme.

- 9.2.8. As per recommendation at paragraph 3.2 of this report it is not proposed to roll these monies over in to 2023/24 and instead reallocate the maximum underspend to allow the final underspend value to be spent in full by March 2023. The following priority areas have been identified for this additional in year investment;

Level 2 carriageway repairs	£172k
Lining Work	£43k
Development and design for 20mph zones (aligned to emerging Speed Management Strategy 2022) -	£40k (fixed sum)

9.3. **Policy**

- 9.3.1. There are no policy related implications of this report other than those set out within.

9.4. **Equality**

- 9.4.1. There are no equality implications as a result of this report.

9.5. **Human Resources**

- 9.5.1. Existing staff resources within Cheshire East Highways will be used to manage and administer the proposed revised ward budget scheme, hence there are no human resource implications of this strategy.

9.6. **Risk Management**

- 9.6.1. The legal risks to the proposal for a revised ward budget scheme are set out under section 9.1 of this report.

9.6.2. The financial risks to the proposal for a revised ward budget scheme are set out under section 9.2 of this report.

9.6.3. The revised approach is designed to reduce delivery risks based on the ability to plan and programme work more effectively.

9.7. **Rural Communities**

9.7.1. There are no rural community impacts as a result of the content of this report.

9.8. **Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

9.8.1. There are no Children and Young People/Cared for Children impacts as a result of the content of this report.

9.9. **Public Health**

9.9.1. There are no public health impacts as a result of the content of this report.

9.10. **Climate Change**

9.10.1. There are no climate change impacts as a result of the content of this report.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Tom Shuttleworth Interim Head of Highways tom.shuttleworth@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	NA
Background Papers:	Ward Members Highways Budget Pilot Scheme – Update, Highways and Transport Committee report, 13 th January 2022 (pg 89-94 of agenda pack) (Public Pack)Agenda Document for Highways and Transport Committee, 13/01/2022 10:30 (cheshireeast.gov.uk) Full Council meeting minutes, 17 th February 2021 Minutes Template (cheshireeast.gov.uk)