

BUDGET PANEL

2 DECEMBER 2014

Present: Councillor A Khan (Chair)
Councillor A Joynes (Vice-Chair)
Councillors J Aron, K Collett, S Counter (For minute numbers 22 to 24), G Derbyshire, J Dhindsa, R Martins and T Williams

Also present: Councillor Mark Watkin (Portfolio Holder for Democracy and Governance and Shared Services)

Officers: Shared Director of Finance
Acting Head of Finance
Finance Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There was a change of membership for this meeting: Councillor Collett replaced Councillor Greenslade and Councillor Williams replaced Councillor Taylor.

It was noted that Councillor Counter had sent apologies as she would be arriving late due to work commitments.

20 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest.

21 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 October 2014 were submitted and signed.

22 FEES AND CHARGES 2015/16

The Panel received a report of the Finance Manager setting out the proposed fees and charges for the financial year 2015/16.

The Director of Finance Shared Services informed the Panel that the majority of changes were due either to the way a service was provided to the customer or the volume had changed.

Budget Movement Reconciliation

Councillor Martins commented that it was a good report and was pleased that the Council had not proposed to make too many changes. He asked whether 'Environmental Miscellaneous' should be included.

The Director of Finance Shared Services advised that the budget variance was probably due to a change in volume. The comments referred to a reduction in Fixed Penalty Notices.

Councillor Martins referred to Centrepont Community Centre. He was aware that the centre had returned to the Council's control. He asked what steps the Council would be taking to increase the income from this centre.

The Director of Finance Shared Services advised that she would ask the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services to provide a written response to the Panel.

The Chair informed the Panel that the Property Task Group had recently received a summarised version of the consultant's final report into the Council's property portfolio. He felt that a wider Member participation was needed in reviewing the report and some of its key questions. He suggested that it could be built into Budget Panel's work programme.

Corporate Strategy and Client Services' Charges

Cheslyn Gardens

Councillor Martins noted the increased charges for Cheslyn Gardens. He felt there was not a great demand to hire this venue and if the charge was increased, there could be less demand in the future. He believed that people should be encouraged to use it.

The Director of Finance Shared Services advised that officers could review how much income the Council received from hiring Cheslyn Gardens.

Councillor Joynes suggested that the terms and conditions for hire may require some educational aspect to be included in events there. Councillor Aron confirmed that this was correct as she hired on behalf of a lunch club and they were required to provide some educational element at each session.

Graffiti Removal

The Panel had a thorough discussion on the proposed increased charge for the removal of graffiti from private property. This charge was considered to be penalising someone who was the victim of anti social behaviour. Members commented that it was unreasonable to charge a person to have sexist, racist or offensive words removed from their property. One suggestion was that the Council should not charge for the removal of sexist, racist or offensive language. However, several Members felt that further information was needed about the

charging strategy. It was recognised that there was a cost to the Council each time graffiti had to be removed. It was suggested that a scrutiny review should be carried out to consider the overall policy related to the removal of graffiti.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer referred the Panel to the report which showed that three columns of the pricing strategy were marked. She suggested that officers could contact the relevant department to obtain further information for the January meeting. The Panel would then be able to make a decision on its recommendation when the full budget report was considered.

Following further discussion it was proposed that the Panel should recommend to Cabinet that the charge should be frozen pending a future scrutiny review of the charging policy. The Panel agreed to this proposal.

Special Collections

The Chair noted that the report proposed that the special collections charge was increased by 50p. He considered this could be linked to fly tipping.

Councillor Dhindsa commented that he regularly saw new fly tipping in Vicarage Ward. He felt that it cost more to collect the fly tipped waste as it was not planned. He believed that fly tipping had increased since the Council had started charging to collect bulky items.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised the Panel that this matter had been raised at Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Head of Community and Customer Services had reported that the Council had been charging for special collections for a long time and that it was not possible to identify a correlation between the Council charging and the amount of fly tipping in the Borough. The Environmental Health and Licensing Section Head would be attending Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2015 to report on fly tipping and the enforcement action carried out.

The Director of Finance Shared Services informed the Panel of a scheme which was run in the Greater Manchester area called 'Bulky Bob's'. The company collected bulky items and then recycled them. The local authorities in the area did not collect any bulky items.

Councillor Martins commented that fly tipping affected the town's image.

Recycling income

Councillor Aron noted the reduction in income from recycling.

The Director of Finance Shared Services explained that there was an increase in the net cost. This section showed the income the Council received from the resale of recyclable materials.

The Portfolio Holder added that Watford Borough Council was no longer part of the countywide recycling agreement. The Council had decided to continue its relationship with the previous recycling company as part of a different contract.

Planning Services' Charges

Councillor Derbyshire said that he was pleased to see that there was no proposal to increase the parking permit charges for the new financial year. He considered there to be no justification for an increase as the parking reserves should remain neutral. The Panel had thoroughly discussed the erosion of the parking reserves in 2013. He noted that the reserve had increased by 1 April 2014 from the original figures discussed.

RESOLVED –

1. that the charge for graffiti removal be frozen in 2015/16 to the 2014/15 charge, pending a scrutiny review.
2. that Budget Panel's comments be noted regarding the proposed changes to the fees and charges for 2015/16.

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FINANCE DIGEST: PERIOD 7

The Panel received the latest Finance Digest, which covered the period to the end of October.

The Director of Finance Shared Services informed the Panel that this was the first edition in the new format. She asked Members that if they had any comments regarding the format to contact the officers. She highlighted some of the key elements within the report.

The Acting Head of Finance Shared Services drew the Panel's attention to the Treasury Management section. He advised that the current predictions were that interest rates would not rise until June 2015.

The Chair commented that he liked the version of the Treasury Management which showed the various banks the Council invested in, including the current rate of interest.

The Acting Head of Finance Shared Services advised that this could be incorporated into future editions. It was noted that the Treasury Management report was regularly presented to Audit Committee. A report was to be presented to Audit Committee on 10 December.

Following a question from Councillor Aron, the Director of Finance Shared Services advised that she would contact the relevant department for further information regarding the income from Hertfordshire County Council for parks and open spaces.

The Director of Finance Shared Services also agreed to obtain information regarding the Colosseum contract service.

Councillor Williams asked if officers could provide further information about the Legal and Property debtors. He also requested information on any write off policy the Council had in place.

The Director of Finance Shared Services confirmed that the Council did have a policy. She was able to agree debts could be written off to a certain level and above that level a report would have to be presented to Cabinet.

The Chair noted the unfavourable variance of £100,000 for Economic Development projects and initiatives. The Panel was advised that this was further explained in the next section of the report as being funded from reserves. The Chair informed the Panel that the previous evening Cabinet had agreed the Economic Development Strategy. He suggested that the Panel might wish to have some input into the strategy. He asked the Committee and Scrutiny Officer to ensure the report was circulated to Budget Panel.

RESOLVED –

that Budget Panel's comments be noted.

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DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Thursday 15 January 2015
- Tuesday 24 February 2015

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 7.55 pm