

BUDGET PANEL

8 February 2012

Present: Councillor Dhindsa (Chair)
Councillor Poole (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Counter (for minute numbers 50 to 51), Derbyshire,
Greenslade, Meerabux, Rackett and Watkin (for minute numbers 50
to 51)

Also present: Councillor Wylie, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services
Councillors Johnson and Mortimer

Officers: Head of Strategic Finance
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

47. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Martins.

48. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

49. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2012 were submitted and signed.

50. FINANCE DIGEST 2011/12: PERIOD 9 (END OF DECEMBER)

The Panel received a report of the Head of Strategic Finance incorporating the latest Finance Digest as at the end of December (Period 9).

The Head of Strategic Finance reported that there had been an improvement on the previous period. The amount to be drawn down from the Economic Impact Reserve was less than the figure anticipated in the Period 8 Forecast.

A Member commented that this year a key issue had been the shortfall in income from commercial rents. He asked that the Council had ensured that a realistic level of income had been estimated in the 2012/13 budget, having taken account of this year's income.

The Head of Strategic Finance advised that the Medium Term Financial Strategy, which had been included as an Appendix to the budget report considered at the last meeting, had reflected on the current position and the potential reduction in rental income going forward.

Another Member asked for details of the total revenue generated for each of the allotment sites in the Borough. He also enquired how the income was monitored. He explained that he had visited a number of sites and had noted that some plots had been empty for a considerable time. In some cases plots had not been in use and had been replaced with grass.

One Member said that he was an allotment holder and it was not always possible to tell if a plot had been let.

Another Councillor mentioned that the Panel would be reviewing income generation in 2012/13. The Panel would be able to review the allotment income as part of that scrutiny.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Panel that according to the latest edition of the Forward Plan, Cabinet would be considering the framework for the Watford Allotments Strategy in March.

The Head of Strategic Finance advised that he was aware the Member had already raised several questions about allotments with Community Services. He said that he would contact the Parks and Open Spaces Section Head and would endeavour to get information to provide a response.

RESOLVED –

that the Finance Digest as at the end of period 9 be noted.

51. **WORK PROGRAMME AND ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12**

The Panel received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services including the latest update of the 2011/12 work programme. The Panel was also asked to consider the information to be included in the 2011/12 Annual Report. The Head of Strategic Finance circulated a list of the items covered throughout the year.

A Member asked that the Annual report included a reference to the training sessions. He said that the session on the Property Review had been very welcome.

It was agreed that this should be included.

Another Member added that he would welcome further training on budget related subjects.

The Chair felt that Budget Panel had been very good throughout the year and that there had been some very good discussions. He referred to the debate on the proposed changes to the fees and charges for the Controlled Parking Zone permits. On this occasion the Panel had not agreed with the officer's recommendation and the Panel's comments had been forwarded to Cabinet when it had considered the report.

A Member agreed and said that this had shown that the Panel could be effective. It was able to provide Cabinet with an alternative option prior to it making its decision.

The Chair also wished to thank the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services for regularly attending the meetings and answering Members' questions.

One Member said that he had been disappointed by one report about the result of the parking permit decision. He felt it had not portrayed the fair and open discussions at the meetings. Members from all parties had agreed the final resolution.

The Chair said that he acknowledged the Member's comments but the Panel did not write political leaflets. He agreed that there had been a fair discussion and all Member's had supported the final decision. The minutes reflected the discussion that had taken place. He added that it was important that all Members on Budget Panel worked together. They were able to discuss the topics and come to a consensus when making the decision.

A Member said that she had found the session about the cost of consultants useful. It had helped Members to understand why consultants were used for projects. She asked that for the following year the Panel might wish to look at how the Council might try to increase revenue from its property portfolio.

Another Member agreed to this suggestion and asked that it was included in the next work programme. An important area to be tackled next year would be income generation. This had to be a major priority.

The Panel agreed that this should be included in the 2012/13 work programme.

A Member commented on a national news story about the method of payment to the Chief Executive of the Student Loan company. He asked whether there were any repercussions for local government, for example had the Government put pressure on local authorities to review their payment methods to consultants.

The Head of Strategic Finance explained that when he had acted as a consultant for a local authority he had been paid a daily rate and he was responsible for paying his taxes. Local authorities submitted returns to the Inland Revenue regarding consultants. Consultants would be obliged to submit their tax returns and details of expenses. The Head of Strategic Finance assured the Panel that the Council would not enter into 'sham' contracts.

The Chair thanked the Head of Strategic Finance and Committee and Scrutiny Officer for their support throughout the year.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that the draft section regarding Budget Panel would be circulated to all Panel Members prior to its inclusion in the final report.

RESOLVED –

that the Panel's comments be included in the Annual Report.

Chair
Budget Panel

The meeting started at 7.00 p.m.
and finished at 7.35 p.m.