

Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee

Response to Main Opposition Group Budget Proposals 2014/15

Introduction

The Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee is a politically balanced Committee of eight elected members, one co-opted member of the public and one co-opted Town & Parish Councillor.

Under the Council's Constitution the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee acts as a consultee for draft budget proposals published by the administration and any alternative proposals developed by opposition groups.

Committee met on 3rd February 2015 to consider the main opposition group's Budget Proposals 2015/16.

The proposals were presented by the main opposition group Leader, Cllr. A. Eade and Cllr. S. Bentley, Shadow Cabinet Member.

The Committee thanked the opposition group for their work in producing an alternative budget which members felt was good for the democratic process and for providing challenge. Following consideration and debate of the proposals, the Committee has agreed the following response.

Main Opposition Proposals	Committee's Comments / Response
Adult Care Services	<p>The Committee recognised that the savings that are identified in the Adult Care Budget are challenging but were of the view that rather than reducing the level of savings required it is important that Scrutiny ensures that service users, family and carers are involved and consulted on the changes and that there are proper safeguards to ensure that if there are problems these are identified. If issues are identified these should come back to Scrutiny.</p> <p>It was not clear to the Committee how the savings from Adult Care services would be achieved in future years and the Committee questioned how proposals for additional funding for adult services in 2015/16 would be continued in future years.</p>
The development of the LDP and the proposal to review, re-visit and re-weight sites identified for development to protect greenfield sites	<p>The Committee discussed the need to use brownfield and greenfield sites to balance urban and rural housing development to generate growth and vibrant communities.</p> <p>The Committee recognised that brownfield sites are more difficult to develop and questioned how private developers would be incentivised to develop</p>

	<p>these and how this would be funded.</p> <p>The Committee also commented that the proposed review of the Local Development Plan would require further consultation which would delay the process past the date when the current plan expires in 2016.</p> <p>Following the Committee meeting it was confirmed that Telford & Wrekin Council has an adopted plan and is not in a minority of Council's without an adopted plan.</p>
<p>The Leader of the Main Opposition said he would support further lobbying to seek Government funding to incentivise the development of brownfield sites.</p>	<p>This was welcomed by the Committee and Members would like to see this actioned in the next 3 months.</p>
<p>Proposal to cancel the Destination Telford Initiative</p>	<p>There is a need to continue to attract business and tourism investment to the whole of Telford and Wrekin and also to continue to build on the success of the Southwater Development in the town centre. The public consultation has confirmed the importance of shopping, recreations and heritage as an attraction in the Borough, including the borough towns.</p> <p>The Committee were of the view that the investment of £250k in the Destination Telford programme provides value for money as it is an integral part of the business supporting and business winning approach which has contributed to the local economy growing 50% faster than the UK average. It was noted that First Point for business has been very successful and that this was established following the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review by the Co-operative and Communities Scrutiny Committee.</p>
<p>Proposal to cancel the Pride Programme</p>	<p>It was clarified at the meeting that existing commitments under the Pride Programme would continue and that the saving from this proposal is £0.750 million. Several members of the Committee gave examples of Pride in the Community and the benefits of this programme to identify the schemes that would improve their communities. It was highlighted that many of the schemes address environmental concerns, which account for 80% of the complaints received by the Council. Members commented that if the environmental concerns were</p>

	<p>not addressed through the Pride programme there would still be a cost to responding to these issues. The Committee were also concerned that the proposal to cancel the Pride Programme would reduce the Council's ability to employ and support apprentices.</p>
Investment in highways	<p>The Committee questioned where the additional capital funding would be found to undertake this work. The Committee was informed that the additional funding would come from the existing capital expenditure commitments in the Council's social housing scheme and the uncommitted part of the Pride in the Community Programme.</p> <p>The Committee was concerned about the ongoing revenue costs of the proposed level of investment in highways and how this would be sustained in the long term. The Committee was also concerned about the loss of income from the social housing scheme. The Committee were assured that the social housing scheme has been risk assessed, that it is a very sound investment based on prudent predicted figures.</p>
Provision of Secondary Education – replacing Section 106 mechanism with Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to provide funding for additional secondary school places to meet demand resulting from housing development	<p>The Committee noted that the Section 106 Annual report would be presented to Cabinet and that the Housing, Economy and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee plans to look at the issue of Section 106 and CIL as part of next years work programme. One Member of the Committee raised the concern that with both Section 106 and the CIL developers pass these costs on to house buyers.</p>
Partnering with other authorities	<p>The Committee expressed concerns at the proposals to partner with other authorities, particularly regarding sharing the Senior Officer Team. One Member of the Committee said that it would be possible to share some staff e.g. PAs and finance officers supporting the work of the LEP.</p> <p>Other members remained concerned the figures for the savings that would be achieved through sharing services were not based on evidence and practical examples were not provided. There was particular concern about the risk to attracting external funding through the LEP.</p>
Removal of direct financial support for Trade Unions and indirect Union support via free accommodation	<p>The Committee expressed concerns that removing local support would be damaging for relations with staff and would mean that staff and union representatives would have to take more time off work to travel to alternative venues. The Committee</p>

	<p>recognised that union representatives have a legal right to reasonable time off to undertake union duties.</p>
<p>Management of Leisure Facilities Pilot</p>	<p>The Committee expressed concern that if leisure facilities were managed independently that there would be lost efficiencies through reduced economies of scale. Other risks identified were that the borough wide offer of leisure services would not be co-ordinated and time tables would clash.</p> <p>The Council would remain financially responsible for the service and if centres began to use different financial management systems this would cause problems and increase costs.</p> <p>If leisure facilities opted out of council back office services e.g. ITC this would create a reputation risk for the Council and reduce the income generated by this service.</p>
<p>Free swimming lessons for adults who cannot swim</p>	<p>Members questioned how many people would take up this scheme and the number of people who would be able to learn to swim over a five lesson period. The Committee was concerned that this proposal was not backed up by evidence. The wider public health benefit of free swimming for people over 50 was supported by the Committee.</p>
<p>Rights of Way</p>	<p>Members asked if this investment would include improvement in facilities for rural and urban areas and questioned the outcomes that would be achieved through an investment of £50k.</p>
<p>Contacting the Authority / Customer Services</p>	<p>It was recommended that Scrutiny should undertake a comprehensive review of Customer Services during the 2015/16 municipal year.</p>