

BUDGET & FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**Minutes of a meeting of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 17 February 2015 at 6.30pm in Meeting Room G3, Addenbrooke House, Ironmasters Way, Telford, TF3 4NT**

PRESENT: Councillors S A W Reynolds (Chair), R K Austin, R C Evans and G C W Reynolds and Co-optees: Mr R Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors S Davies (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills) and A D McClements (Chair, Co-operative and Communities Scrutiny Committee)

IN ATTENDANCE: F Bottrill (Scrutiny Group Specialist), D Moseley (Scrutiny Officer) and J Power (Delivery and Planning Manager)

BFSC-18 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meetings of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee held on 6 January 2015, 13 January 2015, 21 January 2015, 3 February 2015 and 11 February 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman subject to Cllr R K Austin's apologies being recorded for the meeting on 6 January 2015.

BFSC-19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors N A Dugmore and C P R Mollett and Mrs F Robinson (co-optee)

BFSC-20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr R C Evans commented that she was employed locally by an adult care provider but, as this did not specifically relate to any elements of the budget proposals to be discussed at this particular meeting, she would not be withdrawing from the meeting.

BFSC-21 SERVICE & FINANCIAL PLANNING STRATEGY 2015/16 – 2017/18 (DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS)**(a) Feedback on public consultation**

The Delivery and Planning Manager informed the Committee that consultation began on 5 January 2015 and ended on 8 February 2015; the Council's approach had been made up of 3 key themes:

- Demonstrating Council achievements since 2011, linking with an earlier major consultation and asking people to share their thoughts about Telford and Wrekin again.
- Highlighting some simple ways that residents could help the Council to save more money.
- Communication of key budget messages including the growth agenda.

Consultation had focussed on the Cabinet Member for Finance and Enterprise visiting a number of areas across the Borough with an interactive road show in January and early February, the Community Panel Survey, Online Survey and an article in Your Voice. In total contact was made with almost 2,600 local residents and 1,608 responded to the survey. The programme of engagement and awareness had a powerful reach of over 57,000 contacts through the use of social media. Headline messages from the consultation were:-

- 37% of people said that the best thing about the borough was the range of shopping and recreational activities. This was followed by 34% of respondents who said that the best thing was the borough's parks, play areas and open spaces and 15% who said that the best thing about Telford and Wrekin was its heritage and local identity.
- 21% of respondents said that their biggest concerns or problems related to highways and pavements. 17% identified concerns with environmental issues (including street cleanliness, litter and fly tipping). 17% also highlighted problems with safety (including crime and anti-social behaviour)
- Respondents were asked what would be the one thing they would change about the borough and there was not a single or majority issue identified. 14% of respondents wanted to see improvements made to highways and pavements. 13% wanted further improvements to the shopping and recreational offer in the borough, and 12% wanted to see improvements made in dealing with environmental issues.

These messages were not unusual in terms of previous years but, if comparison was drawn with the 2011 consultation, the key change would be that in 2011 jobs and the economy had been identified as strong concerns.

The investment proposals were supported by three-quarters of respondents, with the remaining have a neutral opinion. Nine out of 10 residents supported investment in youth unemployment initiatives with similar levels of support for funding for the local food bank, crisis support and low cost loans, and the further investment of £1m for a second round of Community Pride Fund in 2017/18. Proposals with lower levels of support, but still attracting majority support included free swimming for over 50s, St Georges regeneration and rollout of superfast broadband.

The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills explained the culture change around the consultation process which had been driven by the Cabinet Member for Finance and Enterprise who had visited numerous locations across the borough. The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills was pleased that there wasn't an issue which was uniting residents' concerns. He welcomed the contribution of Scrutiny during the process and, noted that consultation had not been undertaken lightly – it was a meaningful process which had resulted in Cabinet taking the decision to make some key changes to the proposals as a result of comments received. These changes would be revealed by Cabinet on 18 February 2015.

The Committee were delighted with the reach of the consultation and asked how this compared to previous years. The Delivery and Planning Manager advised that the Corporate Communications Team had done lots of work with social media for this

consultation and the Community Participation and Community Engagement Teams had driven the consultation, working to further boost the level of contacts achieved. He did not have data to compare reach with previous years immediately available but agreed to provide this following the meeting.

Cllr A D McClements referred to the excellent roadshows which had taken place in various communities across the borough. She had personally visited the Wellington roadshow. She noted residents had identified the range of shopping and recreational activities as being the best thing about the borough and wondered if this could be drilled down further, for instance, had Southwater featured in comments? The Delivery and Planning Manager advised that this area generally featured as a strength for the borough.

The Chair noted that a small proportion of residents had highlighted concerns regarding highways and pavements but she believed this could be addressed by the Pride Programme. The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills noted that the New Town roads were built at the same time and were, therefore, naturally declining at the same rate. Programmes such as Parish Environmental Teams and Pride in Your High Street would address these priorities.

The Chair noted that Adult Social Care accounted for 40% of the Council's budget but that this area did not feature highly in residents' concerns. The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills felt that this was one of the services where, if a resident was not directly impacted, they tended not to express a view. However, strong views in support had been verbally expressed at roadshows.

Cllr G Reynolds had attended the roadshow at Oakengates where strong support had been seen for the Gower and St Georges regeneration. She also noted a number of respondents had highlighted heritage and local identity as being the best thing the borough had to offer and asked if this was a new feature. The Delivery and Planning Manager advised that it had been referenced in the Shaping the Future consultation in 2011, and was generally recognised as a key strength.

Cllr A D McClements was delighted that a significant proportion of the community had recognised the importance of providing social support in the form of the foodbank and crisis support.

The Chair noted the branding around "cheap loans" and suggested that this should be changed to "low cost" loans which reflected Credit Union branding and provided a more accurate message. The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills agreed to feed this back to the relevant team.

The Committee formally registered their thanks to the Community Participation, Community Engagement and Corporate Communications Teams for their valuable contribution to driving the consultation process. The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Employment & Skills and Delivery and Planning Manager then left the meeting.

- (b) Further responses to Members' questions on the budget strategy and savings proposals, or the Main Opposition Group alternative budget proposals.

No further questions had been submitted.

The response from the Community Participation Team Manager detailing the support provided to grass-roots organisations in bidding for Community Pride funding and the governance arrangements for the Fund were circulated.

BFSC-22 SCRUTINY RESPONSE TO BUDGET PROPOSALS

- a) The Service & Financial Planning 2015/16-2017/18

Copies of the draft response discussed at the previous meeting were tabled. This had formed the basis of the Chair's informal representations to the Cabinet and a formal response was now required to be published with the Cabinet papers the following day.

Members expanded upon the draft in reference to :-

- Adult Social Care budget and the need for continued discussions between the Council and CCG.
- Innovative income generation, without which the Committee considered that the Council would not be in such a strong position.
- Support for funding for the Pride Programme
- Welcoming the Council Tax freeze for 2015/16 and the commitment to continue the freeze in 2016/17. The Committee also stood by the decision not to accept the government grant offered to freeze Council Tax in 2012/13 and 2013/14, which had been subject to robust scrutiny at the time which concluded that such a freeze would have been detrimental to the Council and its residents in the longer term.
- Following the response from the Community Participation Team Manager, removal of concerns relating to the governance arrangements for the Community Pride Fund and seeking support to be provided to grassroots organisations in making bids.
- The Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee work regarding provision for school places

The Committee welcomed the Cabinet's positive approach to consultation and willingness to revise the proposals in order to address feedback.

- b) The Main Opposition Group alternative budget proposals

Copies of the draft response discussed at the previous meeting were tabled.

Members expanded upon the draft in reference to :-

- Lack of clarity regarding long term funding for the Adult Social Care budget and whether proposed new ways of working would be adopted.

- Development of Local Development Plan. Cllr McClements informed the Committee that, following the meeting on 3 February, she had investigated the position and was able to confirm that the Council was one of 53% of authorities which had got an up to date LDP. The Chair expressed concern that the alternative proposals would result in delays to the formulation of Shaping Places, as re-consultation would be required.
- Lack of clarity regarding proposals to incentivise brownfield land. The Committee welcomed the Main Opposition Group Leader’s offer to engage in lobbying central government in this regard and asked that this take place within three months.
- Consultation feedback supported the aims of the Destination Telford Initiative. The Initiative was key to economic growth in the borough and the Council’s “business winning, business supporting” approach. The alternative proposals did not explain what benefits could be achieved by cancelling a programme which generated £millions from a budget of £250K.
- Concerns about how the Highways proposals would be paid for and satisfy the needs of local people.
- Cancellation of the administration’s proposed Housing Scheme would cancel the associated income generation and potentially leave brownfield land undeveloped. Opposition claims with regard to risk were considered unfounded since the Council’s risk assessment had been cautious.
- The Section 106 mechanism and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which the proposals suggested would better meet funding demands for additional secondary school places, would be reviewed by Scrutiny post-election.
- Concern that savings from proposals to partner with other authorities or share services were not evidence-based and lacked detail
- Clarity regarding employment rights for Trade Union representatives.
- The potential for increased costs to be incurred (eg with regard to financial management systems) if leisure facilities were managed independently as set out in the alternative proposals.
- Proposals to provide free swimming lessons were not backed up by evidence and did not address the public health agenda to the same level as the administration proposals to provide free swimming for over 50s.
- The limited outcomes which could be achieved through a relatively small investment of £50k in rights of way.

The Committee recommended that Scrutiny should undertake a comprehensive review of Customer Services during the 2015/16 municipal year.

The Committee reiterated their disappointment at the late submission of the main opposition’s alternative budget proposals.

In conclusion, the Committee thanked the Scrutiny Team for their work during the intensive budget scrutiny process.

The meeting ended at 8.24pm

Chairman:

Date: