

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.

This year the main opposition group notified scrutiny that they would be putting forward an alternative budget and the Committee met on 21st January to consider the main opposition group's Budget Proposals 2014/15.

The proposals were presented by the main opposition group Leader and the Shadow Member for Finance. Following advice from the Monitoring Officer, Cllr. Lawrence declared a conflict of interest between his role as a member of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee and his role in developing the alternative proposals and that he would not take part in agreeing the response to the proposals. Cllr. Lawrence emphasised the difficulty of developing an alternative budget in a limited time and thanked officers who had supported their work at a busy time.

The Chief Financial Officer attended the meeting on 21st January and confirmed to the Committee that the numbers in the alternative budget added up and that the figures were robust.

Further clarification on a number of questions was provided at the meeting on 4th February.

Following consideration and debate of the proposals, the Committee has agreed the following response.

Comments of the Committee

1. 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.

2. Partnering with other authorities

There was overall agreement with the principle that all opportunities to work with other authorities or organisations to deliver services through a Co-operative approach should be explored. The Council could not afford to ignore potential opportunities and savings, particularly where there were opportunities to develop services locally and to create jobs in the borough.

However, views were split between members who felt strongly that in exploring such options senior management posts must not be merged with other organisations as this would compromise the autonomy of the Council, and those who felt that all options should be kept open.

All members of the Committee agreed that scrutiny has a duty to give this matter full consideration.

3. Review of staff Terms and Conditions

Members were very concerned about the impact that reducing staff terms and conditions would have on staff morale and the ability of the Council to recruit and retain good staff. It was also highlighted that some staff have already experienced a reduction in salary through previous restructures and a large percentage of staff are earning low wages or earning below the national average wage for their service area.

The Committee discussed the implications of reducing staff salaries across the board and expressed concern about the impact on the local economy.

4. Translation services

Some members of the Committee expressed their primary concern regarding this proposal was that it would reduce the Council's ability to communicate effectively with individuals and communities that are vulnerable or disadvantaged, particularly people with sensory disabilities. Members felt the Council has a moral as well as a statutory obligation to provide information to disabled people in a format they understand. Some members were also concerned about potential legal challenge.

5. Impact of withdrawal of Pride in Your Community funding on Parish Environmental Team apprentices

Some members of the Committee questioned the implications of withdrawing the Pride in Your Community programme funding on the apprentices that are employed by the Parish Environmental Teams and whether they would be made redundant.