

Extract from Minutes - Council Meeting 28th November 2005

FIRST READING DEBATE ON 2006/07 TO 2009/10 BUDGET

14. 1st Reading Debate – 2006- 07 to 2009-10 Budget

The Leader introduced the reports of the Executive and Director of Finance and Corporate Resources. The report of the Executive set out the Administration's priorities for spending and activity for 2006/07 and highlighted the achievements made in delivering the 2002-06 Corporate Strategy. The report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources set out the parameters surrounding the setting of the budget. Further to the achievements outlined in the report, the Leader reported that the recent Best Value Performance Indicator residents' survey showed that overall satisfaction results were up from 48% one year ago to 53%. She stated that the Council was now used to winning awards and being held up as an example of best practice.

The Leader expressed her Group's desire to see the regeneration of the borough with the new national stadium at its heart. She referred to the hard fought battle to secure the new stadium which had begun under the Conservative Administration. She saw this as benefiting the whole borough and was critical of those that took the opportunity to cast doubt on the project. The Leader went on to state that her Administration wished to continue to work towards renewing old housing estates, providing new schools to offer children better life chances, providing better opportunities for youth and older people and creating a cleaner, greener borough.

The Leader referred to the piloted ward working scheme as being popular with local people and her Administration's intention to roll it out across the borough after the 2006 local elections. She challenged Opposition Members to explain what their proposals for improvement might be and to explain them to the residents of the borough. In the meantime she invited non-Executive Members to make constructive suggestions for what they would like to see included in the budget.

Councillor R Blackman stated that the Council would not know what level of resource it would have until the local government finance settlement was announced by the Government in December. This meant that the debate amounted to a wish list in light of resources being squeezed by the likelihood that the Council would receive the floor increase in grant and have to meet an increase in the Greater London Council precept and the levy in respect of the Olympics. These factors already indicated that a large increase in the Council Tax would be necessary and Councillor Blackman stated he would be happy to return to the days when the Council Tax was lower and the delivery of services better. He felt the level of Council Tax had reached its limits and stated that the current Administration had overseen a doubling of the Council Tax.

Councillor Nerva spoke in support of running a pilot scheme for household collection of plastics and creating additional sites at which plastics could be dropped off. He asked that investment be made in new technology to allow parking permits to be renewed over the web and for libraries to issue scratchcard permits. Councillor Nerva referred to the Brent magazine and the ward newsletters which were well received by residents but felt that these publications should be made available over the web to people who requested to receive them in that way by way of email alerts.

Councillor Van Colle referred to the Environment and Culture Service Development Plan and reference therein to working with the West London Waste Authority and partner boroughs to secure outlets for disposal and reprocessing other than landfill. He asked if this meant incineration and if so why it did not say so. Councillor Van Colle pointed out that a significant proportion of Environment and Culture's budget went towards improvements in roads and pavements. However he felt it was not clear how this was spent and whether it represented value for money. He asked that the allocation of resources to improving roads and pavements be open to local determination. Councillor Van Colle contrasted the Leader's commitment to creating a greener borough with the proposal to build a school on a playing field site. Whilst supporting the opening of the site for use by schools he submitted it was not necessary to actually build a school on the site and urged the Executive to reconsider this.

Councillor Coughlin explained that the forecasts contained in the report from the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources were based on all the available information and did not take account of any preferences by the Administration. The Administration had set a 4 year strategy and he invited the other Groups to do similar. He acknowledged the financial constraints the Council faced. Councillor Coughlin pointed out that the Audit Commission had rated the value for money Brent gave as being 3 stars (out of 4) which made the Council currently the third best in London behind the City Corporation and Wandsworth Council.

Councillor HB Patel stated that the proposals set out by the Executive would add to the tax burden of residents and submitted that ward councillors should be left to work in their wards without the addition of £1M of officer support.

Councillor J Moher suggested that the proportion of tax paid under the old rating system had been higher than it was now under the Council Tax. He asked that the future funding of the Brent Countryside Day be secured. He referred to the consultation carried out on Fryent Park and complimented Groundwork on its involvement. He asked that funding be provided to ensure the outcomes could be put in place. Councillor Moher also asked that consideration be given to a budget for town twinning activity.

Councillor Sayers referred to the undertaking to restore Dollis Hill House as a community facility which had been long outstanding. He referred to the significant amount of money spent on Gladstone Park with no toilets being

provided. He also made a request for extra resources to be spent on provision for the youth of the borough.

Councillor Duffin requested that housing caretakers be re-introduced to help care for the elderly who were prey for bogus callers operating on some estates. He felt more needed to be done to care for the elderly.

Councillor J Long referred to the improvement in the conditions of pavements in the borough and expressed the hope that such investment would continue. She also asked that the large print version of the Brent Magazine be made available at the same time the magazine was distributed throughout the borough.

Councillor Mendoza suggested that the amount paid out in compensation by the Council as a result of personal injury claims resulting from the poor condition of pavements should be matched by the same amount being invested in improving pavements. He referred to the residents in the Wembley area who were suffering from poor TV reception and stated that it did not appear from the response the Council had received that the developers of Wembley Stadium were doing much about it. If it was a condition of the planning permission he felt it should be enforced. He referred to the popularity of Council's website but felt the large amount of paper he was sent as a councillor could be reduced if more information was sent electronically.

Councillor Farrell supported the request to provide more facilities for the recycling of plastic and for the continued investment in the borough's pavements. She also supported the request for greater provision for the youth of the borough, not only in the provision of facilities but by taking on youth workers as well.

Councillor R Colwill expressed concern over the increase in the cost of the bureaucracy supporting ward working rather than investment in front line services. He submitted that the ward members were best placed to serve local people and asked if the figures shown for ward working included staff costs. He called for more police on the streets to fight rising crime levels and to this end also supported the request for greater resources to be put into youth and community provision for those young people who might otherwise commit crime. He stated that there was a lack of such provision in the north of the borough and asked for more information on how Section 106 monies might be used for this.

The Leader responded to the 1st Reading. She pointed out that the Council Tax was the 3rd lowest in outer London and the 17th lowest across London. She appreciated that there were pressures on the budget and that the settlement was not yet known. She agreed that more was needed to facilitate the recycling of plastics. The Leader stated that a better deal was needed for the Council from the West London Waste Authority. She expressed the view that ward working would enhance the borough and residents had already shown they liked the newsletters. The proposed site for the new school was presently occupied by a poor facility and the development would not take all

the green space. She emphasised the Council's 3 star award for the use of resources making it the third best in London. She acknowledged that action was needed on securing the future of Dollis Hill House. The Leader noted the request for continued investment in pavements. In response to the request for the re-introduction of housing caretakers she pointed out that existing neighbourhood wardens already provided a service. Finally she referred to the significant increase in the capital investment in the borough.

RESOLVED:-

that the reports from the Executive and the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources on the 1st Reading of the 2006/07 Budget be noted and that the views submitted by Members during the course of the 1st Reading Debate be referred to the Executive to determine those it wishes to give further consideration to.