

**Extract of Full Council Minute 19 November 2012**  
**First reading debate on the 2013/14 - 2016/17 budget**

Councillor Butt stated that the budget marked a vital turning point for Brent. He suggested that two years ago few predicted the recession would last so long or how vindictive the Government's welfare cuts would be towards the most vulnerable people in the community; few predicted the Government would target local government to take the brunt of the cuts and he felt this was a recipe for social damage on a scale not seen since the Second World War and would leave a generation of young people permanently scarred by unemployment. Councillor Butt felt this was an ideological experiment designed by the coalition parties but one which would fail. He stated that in Brent there was a strong community focus and that the residents of the borough would not forgive the coalition government for the damage inflicted on the community. However, he stated that he had a personal commitment to improve the lives of the residents of the borough and that was what the Labour Party was doing in Brent. A package of reforms would be brought forward that would help protect the most vulnerable residents based on the fundamental idea that local people could only weather the storm if they were united and given the resilience and protection that only a community could create. The package would put fairness, jobs, growth and community at the heart of everything the Council did. It would increase the pay of the lowest paid workers, and campaign for the private sector to do the same, bring forward plans to reduce the cost of energy for all residents, tackle the problem of slum housing in Brent and focus on jobs and growth. The Council would bring forward a coherent strategy to support the high streets and local businesses and strengthen the relationships with businesses. A new deal for the voluntary and community sector would be developed to transform the lives of the most troubled families and begin the task of tackling health inequality in the Borough. The biggest school building program was underway in the borough. It would be through all these measures that the Council would act as the last line of defence for residents by protecting local schools, business and services. Councillor Butt pointed out that between 2010 and 2014 the budget had been reduced by 28% and the Government's failed austerity policies would mean the cuts would continue after 2015 with a predicted 7% cut every year until 2020 at least. He stated that more residents would find themselves relying on Council services as they struggled to find work and inflation eroded their living standards. The ageing population and high birth rate in the borough meant spending on children's and adult's social care was increasing dramatically. Resolving this would require the complete transformation of the Council as an organisation and the way in which it delivered services to residents. Resources would be shifted from treating problems to preventing them happening, savings would be sought from contractors and providers, inefficiency, duplication and waste would be dealt with and the levels of charges and the frequency of services would be reviewed. Councillor Butt commended the strategy he had outlined and as detailed in the reports before members.

Councillor Lorber responded saying that people were fed up hearing the messages the Leader had delivered. He reminded the meeting that the

previous Labour chancellor had said that whoever won the general election would have to make the biggest cuts ever and that the previous Labour government had used £60B to bail out the banks, much of which would never be returned. More recently Labour politicians had said they would be ruthless about controlling public spending and had spoken of cutting benefits as a way of getting people into work, so he felt there should be no surprise that the government was following this course of action. The aim was to promote fairness and this could not be done if people were locked into a culture of dependency. People in the lowest income bands had been taken out of the tax net and Councillor Lorber contrasted this with the cuts imposed on grants to voluntary organisations at a time when the voluntary sector should be empowered to support local communities. He referred to people being unable to park close to local traders without being fined and to the condition of the streets following the decisions taken to reduce the street sweeping service. Councillor Lorber pointed out that the Leader's speech had made no reference to improving the performance of the Council and making positive proposals to support local businesses and communities.

Councillor Kansagra stated that the cuts had been made necessary by the previous Labour government's excessive spending. Nevertheless he stated that employment in the private sector was rising and the Council was still able to deliver good services showing that there had been economies to make. There had been alternatives to closing six libraries and the parking situation was forcing the closure of local shops. He suggested that the first ½ hour of parking should be free of charge. Councillor Kansagra referred to the new arrangements for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which had seen a large injection of cash by the Government and it was now necessary to ensure the proper management of Brent Housing Partnership. He felt ways could have been found to maintain grants to the voluntary sector. He supported the principles behind the initiative for controlling energy prices but pointed out that the Government had already taken the initiative on this and it should not be for the Council to get involved in private business ventures. Councillor Kansagra submitted that it was not fair that a working family paying taxes should receive less income than a family not working. This made it necessary to cap benefits. He felt that the Council should accept the Council tax freeze grant again made available by the Government.

In response to the comments made about parking charges, Councillor J Moher stated that the Council was reviewing its parking charges. A point was made about the scale of the cuts, rather than the need to make cuts. It was pointed out that in the last two years the Council had achieved a lot but continued to face many challenges. The priorities were to provide jobs and school places. It would be necessary to look strategically at how services were provided.

A view was submitted that it was a tribute to the Government that it had managed to reduce the deficit from the level inherited from the previous government. In contrast to the views of the Leader it was suggested that the Council had broken community spirit by closing libraries, not listening to the views of people, not reducing parking charges and cutting the maintenance of

streets and pavements. A more widely supported view was expressed that parking charges were killing-off local businesses and that only small local businesses could provide the growth needed in the borough. Another aspect raised was the importance of providing affordable homes. It was submitted that the refinancing of the HRA should allow for new homes to be built. Another idea put forward was to provide outdoor fitness equipment in parks. It was submitted that it would serve the Council well to remember that it was there to serve the whole of the borough.

Councillor Butt thanked members for their input and noted the views expressed. He reminded the meeting that employment opportunities had already opened up through the regeneration of a number of areas in the borough; that the Council already had a £80M school building programme; that the closure of some libraries had allowed for an improved service to be provided and that the Council had to be fair in which organisations it grant-aided.

**RESOLVED:**

- (i) that the broad budgetary priorities set out in the report from the Executive be noted, and
- (ii) that the issues raised in the First Reading debate be noted and referred to the Budget and Finance Overview and Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.