

Extract from Minutes - Council Meeting 17th November 2003

FIRST READING DEBATE ON 2004/2005 BUDGET

12. 1st Reading Debate of 2004/05 Budget

The Leader asked the Council to reflect on the progress it had made over the years. She referred to the various awards it had won including three Beacon Council awards, the achievement of liP across almost all of the Council, twelve Chartermarks, nine Beacon schools, two Leading Edge schools and 27 other awards. She also referred to the various Inspection regimes that had commented favourably on the Council's performance. The Leader quoted from passages of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment report which had recently been updated. She stated that this demonstrated a record of success for the Council which she intended to build upon. She stated that the Council's priorities were the residents' priorities.

At this point the time permitted for the Leader's speech had expired and Councillor D Long moved that the Leader be further heard to allow her to complete her speech. This was CARRIED.

The Leader continued by referring to the recent successful anti-social behaviour orders taken out against seven youths and the 14 unacceptable behaviour orders being pursued. She stated that the Administration would continue to build on the successes achieved.

The Leader stated that this item provided the opportunity for non-Executive members to put forward ideas for inclusion in the budget but she made it clear that the Administration would continue to concentrate on improvements to the public realm. She concluded by drawing attention to the building of the new National Stadium which would provide the catalyst for the regeneration of the surrounding area.

Councillor Coughlin emphasized that the papers before the Council did not reflect the views of the Administration or anyone else at this stage but instead were a position statement based on the information currently known. He pointed out that there were additional issues to consider which were the Prudential Capital Scheme, local discretion on Council Tax discounts and the possibility of capping. He pointed out that 75% of the Council's funding came from Government grant. He drew attention to the budget matrixes and the savings and growth bids that had been identified. Councillor Coughlin announced that it was the Administration's intention to fully passport the schools' budget. He welcomed the 4% increase per pupil. He welcomed the chances the new Prudential approach to borrowing for capital purposes presented for local authorities. Councillor Coughlin drew attention to the powers for offering discretionary discounts and the drawbacks to this as set out in paragraph 14.9 of the report. Councillor Coughlin concluded that there were difficult decisions to be made but the Administration was clear about its

priorities and would ensure that Brent continued to have one of the lowest Council Taxes in London.

Councillor Gladbaum raised the issue of the relocation of The Grange Museum. She stated that on its present site insufficient people were able to attend the museum despite it being well known. Next year the Council should know if a Heritage lottery bid had been successful.

Councillor Rands felt that improving the condition of the Borough's quieter roads was a priority to which some longer term thinking was required. He also felt that a report on how to deal with the maintenance of grass verges should be prepared acknowledging that whilst such verges were aesthetically pleasing, the practicalities were that many in narrow roads were unsuitable. He also felt that residents suffered from an erratic refuse collection service with a frequent reason for refuse not being collected being given as a vehicle breakdown. He referred to the problem when service roads were adopted by the Council but did not appear to be added to the street-sweeping contract. Finally, Councillor Rands referred to the difficulties the Sudbury Court Residents' Association had encountered in attracting sufficient planning resources to support their conservation area. Planning had suffered from a turnover of staff and he felt there was a need for a longer term investment in time, training and money within Planning to look after the Borough's conservation areas. Instead an exercise had been carried out to review them. He felt that a number of the growth areas included in the Corporate Services list needed to be reconsidered so that funding could be re-directed.

Councillor Harrod expressed his wish to see extra money made available to develop more initiatives around anti-social behaviour orders and provide support for victims. He also felt action needed to be taken to redress the debt of money owed to rent payers who in the past had borne a disproportionate liability which had advantaged the Council tax payer. He pointed out that for five of the last six years there had been no rent increase and he hoped that it would not be necessary to increase rents for next year.

Councillor Allie commented that the priorities for spending in 2004/05 provided no commitment to addressing the dire need for housing in the Borough and to bring existing housing up to decent standards and reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. He also referred to the issue of housing for key workers and pensioner poverty, stating that many pensioners were unable to adequately heat their homes.

Councillor J Long felt the Council needed to provide funding for an additional civil advice worker to deal with all the cases received by Trading Standards. She also referred to the lack of a mobility forum which would affect many people and she asked whether the Council would lose out in attracting funding because it had not got such a forum in place.

Councillor Fiegel referred to the size and structure of the Communications/Consultation Unit and referred to the number of publications

it produced. He felt resources could be re-directed to improve the conditions of roads and pavements in the Borough.

Councillor Thompson welcomed the Administration's intended aim of increasing resources to improve roads and pavements. He felt it essential that these sums were not reduced from the level indicated in the papers. He made a particular request for investment in the regular cleansing of the new paving in Kilburn High Road to keep it looking good. He also made a request for resources to be allocated towards the repair of the chapel and pathways in Paddington Cemetery and the consequent need to support the Cemeteries Investment Programme.

Councillor Sayers maintained there was an absence of any parking enforcement officers within his area of the Borough. He stated that Hassop Road had become a 'no go' area. He alleged that traffic wardens were not carrying out their job properly and cars were being left parked in the road all day. He referred to what he saw as the disgraceful condition of the Cricklewood Broadway pavement. Councillor Sayers also felt that the Council had failed to address the derelict condition of Dollis Hill House. Finally, he mentioned his disappointment that once again the Brent side of Cricklewood Broadway did not have any Christmas lights.

Councillor Arnold spoke in support of the warden services and their successes. She felt that efficiency measures needed to be encouraged and an increase in the services supported. She felt other initiatives around the warden services and the pursuit of anti-social behaviour orders also needed supporting.

Councillor Van Colle stated that there was a lack of planning enforcement within the Borough which allowed developers to constantly breach planning control. He referred to the Environmental Services' Service Development Plan which indicated an intention to pursue the implementation of controlled parking zones which he felt were deeply unpopular in some areas. With regard to waste recycling, Councillor Van Colle stated that the Overview task group had thought that the investment required would be met by capital monies but the papers indicated that this would be met by revenue funding. He also referred to the recommendation of the task group to re-sign the location of recycling facilities which appeared not to have been picked up.

Councillor Lorber stated that there was general dissatisfaction over lack of enforcement within controlled parking zones. He also stated that there was a need to improve the Onyx contract. He felt it was time to address the street cleaning and associated services by taking them back in house. He felt that there needed to be a start made in planning to improve the cleanliness of the Borough.

Councillor R Blackman pointed out that the Liberal Democrat Group had previously supported the award of the contract to Onyx. He also stated that many of the services that had received awards, as referred to by the Leader, had begun their improvement under the previous Conservative Administration.

Councillor Blackman stated that the reality was that the Government largely controlled the level of Council Tax the Council would have to levy and the key issue was therefore how much the Government grant would be for Brent and the affordability level of residents. They had already suffered from large increases and the proposals in the papers before Council represented an unsustainable level of spend.

The Leader responded to the first reading. She made it clear that the Administration had no intention of cutting back on the number of publications produced by the Communications and Consultation Unit. She stated that an increased level of funding had already been spent on improving roads and pavements within the Borough in an effort to address what was a London-wide issue. She accepted that the Paddington Cemetery was a good asset to the Borough. She confirmed that wardens were operating effectively in the Borough and stated that a decision on Dollis Hill House would be made soon. She expressed some sympathy for the point made regarding the need to address the condition of the quieter roads in the Borough and to improve the refuse collection service in some areas. She made it clear there was no intention to cut back on the corporate centre and return to the past when the corporate centre was reduced to an unsustainable level. She expressed some sympathy with the views regarding enforcement within controlled parking zones. The performance of Onyx was subject to scrutiny but she stressed that the bin collection rate stood at 99.8% so only a few residents were missing out. Finally, she reminded the Council that the Liberal Democrat's alternative budget for the present year had been only a little lower than the Council's budget.

RESOLVED:-

that the reports from the Executive and the Director of Finance on the 1st Reading of the 2004/05 Budget be noted and that the views submitted by members during the course of the first reading debate be referred to the Executive for further consideration.

Fourth Meeting of Schools Forum held at Brent Town Hall on Wednesday 3rd December 2003 at 6.00pm

Attendance

Members of the Forum

Governors

Countess Mariaska Romanov
Stephen Greene
Rochelle Hausman
Pat Anderson
Mike Heiser (Chair)

Headteacher

Martin Earley
Judy Edwards
Vivienne Orloff
Kathy Heaps
Sue Knowler
Terry Molloy
Mike Maxwell
Sylvie Libson

Others

Lesley Benson (EYDCP)
Tony Vaughan (T Union)

Observers

Cllr. Michael Lyon – Lead Member Education Arts and Libraries
Tommy Masters (Learning and Skills Council)

Officers

John Christie	Director of Education	
Martin Stratford	Assistant Director of Education	
Duncan McLeod	Deputy Director of Finance	
Roger Annan	Education Financial Services	minutes

Apologies for absence received from Corinne Van Colle (newly appointed representative of the VA sector) Frank Thomas and Joyce Bacchus. Shailen Shailendra has resigned from the Forum. The Chair thanked George Benham for his work on the Forum and noted that he had been replaced by Martin Earley as a secondary headteacher representative. The Chair also welcomed Mr. Ken Chapman of the Audit Commission as a visitor.

2. Minutes of the second meeting held 2nd July 2003 and matters arising from them

Two amendments were made to the minutes – the addition of the word budget as the penultimate word in line one of item 5 and the correction of the intended finish time of the next meeting in item 9 to 8 p.m.

There were two matters arising:

- It was agreed to defer further consideration of the asset management plan to the next meeting of the Forum.
- Martin reported that advice regarding school journeys had been contracted out and that it would be issued towards the beginning of the next term.

3. Funding Formula Review 2004-05

Martin introduced the formula review and went through points from the papers provided. As a result of the consultation some extra models had been provided in the papers for the meeting. He went through the issues arising from the consultation and the resultant proposals from officers. He stressed that accurate figures for individual schools' budgets would not be able to be calculated until the 2004 PLASC data was available (second half of January). September 2003 pupil number data was being used in current calculations. There was no specific funding included for workforce reform or single status issues. He explained the minimum pupil funding guarantee and that it excluded statements of SEN, NNDR and sixth form funding. He also gave details of the teachers pay increase.

There would be growth requirements in 2004/05 due to increases in out Borough costs for SEN (due to unpredicted increased numbers of placements and substantially increased charges from SEN independent schools), additional teacher requirements at the KS4 PRU and increased demands on the home tuition service. These came to around £2m and meant that within the Schools Block budget the non-devolved element would increase by a greater percentage than the increase in funding devolved to schools. This will require the Council to ask the Secretary of State for a dispensation and he asked the Forum to support such a request. The effect of this would be for the Schools budget to increase by 5.5% rather than the 6.8% that would apply without the SEN growth. The 5.5% was still over 2% more than the level of inflation for 2004/05 of 3.4% assumed by the DfES. In cash terms, the extra 2% provides about £2m over inflation and after allowing for the impact of rising rolls that would leave around £1.25m available to schools for workforce reform, single status and other budget pressures.

The original decision to reduce the Standards Fund has been reversed by the DfES. However, the reversal of previously announced reductions by the DfES left the EAL budget short by £0.740m of matched funding for non-devolved Standards Fund projects.

In answer to questions Martin said that final 2004/05 budget decisions and decisions with regard to the funding formula would be made by the Executive on 9th February 2004. The executive Meeting on 8th December 2003 would be making initial decisions on the budget.

Martin said that the DfES had indicated that they did not expect workforce reform to proceed as quickly as expected and that the key year for funding it would be 2005-06.

Sylvie expressed considerable concern about the effect of the non-delegated expenditure increase within the Schools Block that effectively reduced available additional funding to schools from 6.8% to 5.5%. She felt that the Council should look elsewhere for the additional funding and commented that Brent's funding levels for primary education were low compared to those of neighbouring authorities.

Mike Maxwell was concerned that the issues of workforce reform and Teacher Pay and Conditions issues were setting up schools to be in conflict with their staff. Sylvie felt a message should be sent to the DfES from the Forum that workforce reform could not proceed effectively without specific funding being made available for it.

Michael Lyon said that the SEN issues could not be ducked, and explained that the Council was subject to an overall 5.8% ceiling for formula grant increase. He explained the difficulties in raising Council tax in 2004/05 by significantly more than the rate of inflation due to the Government's threat to use their reserve capping powers, particularly in the light of the 20% increase in 2003/04. He was not aware of any compulsory redundancies occurring in 2003/04 in schools. Judy described the needs of the elderly and social service requirements that she came into contact with daily and that these had to be taken into account in the Council's budget. Michael L stressed the needs of other Brent services. Sylvie felt strongly that the SEN increases should be funded from further increases in Council Tax. Sue felt that if the Forum did support the Council's application for dispensation the word 'reluctantly' should be put in any recommendation to the Council. Sylvie wanted additional funding to ensure primary schools got the 6.8% increase. The need to put additional growth into SEN items in the schools block was not disputed, but it should not be at the expense of the funds devolved to schools.

The Chair summed up in three options:

- (a) not to support the application for dispensation
- (b) agree to support the application
- (c) agree but state a preference for Brent to fund a 6.8% increase to schools' devolved funding.

A question was asked about the effect on the budget of non-collection of tax. Duncan said that this did not impact on the issues under discussion.

It was AGREED not to support the Council's application for dispensation and that the additional funding required to meet the growth in SEN needs within the Schools Block should be met by increasing the Council Tax. (9 votes to 2 with 3 declared abstentions).

The Forum then discussed the individual funding formula factor issues raised in the consultation process:

The SEN Audit had not produced an overall preference from the options suggested although option 1 had the most support. The Devolved Funding Heads' Group had suggested that funding could be distributed on a basis of 50% by roll and 50% on the basis of action/action plus number with a maximum loss protection factor of 3.5% applied throughout. Martin produced a model of this proposal that showed that the outcome of this would be that a few schools would gain significantly and the majority would be protected. Nursery figures are low. After considerable debate and discussion of further modelling, it was decided that further thought was needed before a decision could be made. It was agreed to ask Martin to produce a further model for the next meeting based on school action and action plus data (option 1) with the values weighted at 1/1.5 as per the current audit bandings.

Social Deprivation Factor After discussion it was AGREED to use the 200 most deprived Boroughs in London as the basis for identification and model 3 (£2,000 floor) was AGREED as the basis of distribution (5 votes to 3).

Needs-Led Factor AGREED no change.

Nursery Funding Place factor AGREED.

Floors/Ceilings It was felt that this had been superseded by national funding decisions. In response to a question Martin explained the absolute minimum increase per pupil would be 3.4%.

John Kelly Project Concern was expressed by the primary sector but this change was agreed after Martin assured the Forum that the additional funding was outside the 5.5% ISB increase and including the factor in the ISB avoided the need to seek further dispensation from the DfES for the project, which would otherwise be in the non-devolved Schools Block.

Funding for reducing numbers No view was taken.

Federation split site factor It was agreed to accept this subject to a three-year limit on its application.

Reduce number of factors AGREED no change.

Primary heads suggested that, in view of workforce reform, the PTR used in the curriculum weighting calculation be changed from 1:26 to 1:24. There was further debate on the funding situation compared to the SSA of the primary sector. Kathy explained that one third of specialist school funding was required to be spent on the family of primary schools associated with each specialist secondary school. Sylvie did not believe that this always happened.

It was agreed that the PTR change should be modelled and discussed further at the next meeting.

Members of the Forum agreed to continue the meeting to 8.15 p.m.

4. Non-devolved items within the Schools Block

Martin went through appendix A of document 2 and the Schools Forum AGREED the items included in the non devolved element of the Schools Block.

5. Other 2004-05 budget issues (new growth, including workforce reform)

The Forum noted the five 2004/05 budget proposals from the Teachers Panel (full passporting; full funding of all pay awards, rising rolls and inflation; restoration of the Trade union Facilities Agreement; full funding of workforce reform and an increase of at least 50% in the funding of non-statemented pupils) and agreed to consider them further at the next meeting.

Other issues had been covered in the discussions recorded above.

6. School Meals Contract

The Forum was asked to agree to the proposals for dealing with the school meals contract as set out in the report at document 10. A further single paper was tabled giving further details of requirements for nutrition and related issues. It was agreed to make no comment on the report. Lesley welcomed the additional nutritional requirements.

7. Standard School Year

The ALG has determined to recommend the standard school year if two-thirds of London LEAs support it. This number has yet to be reached (mainly because several LEAs have yet to take a formal position) and so the proposal is unlikely to go ahead in 2005-06. Agreed to discuss further at the next meeting.

8. Any other business

A suggestion was made that support/training be provided for governor representatives on the Forum. Attention was drawn to an area on the DfES web site aimed at helping Schools Forum members. To be discussed further at the next meeting.

9. Time, date and venue of the next meeting

It was agreed to hold the next meeting on **Wednesday 28th January 2004 at 6.00 p.m.**

As no rooms at the Town Hall are available on that date, the meeting will be held at John Kelly Girls' School.

A suggestion that the meeting be lengthened by 30 minutes was not accepted.

The meeting closed at 8.30 p.m.

General Proposals for the Budget 2004/05
Comments from the Overview Committee January 2004

Background

The Overview Committee, under the provisions of Standing Order 25(a) of the Constitution, is required to consider, and report back to the Executive on general proposals for the budget (including the capital programme) referred to it. The Overview Committee met on Tuesday 20th January 2004 for this purpose in relation to the budget for 2004/05. This is its report.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and the Director of Finance were present at the meeting to respond to the Committees questions. The following are matters to which the Committee would like to draw the Executive's attention when finalising their budget proposals.

The Capacity of the Council

The Committee noted that the growth detailed in the budget options represented a substantial programme of work, particularly with regard to the Capital programme. While Members welcomed the proposed increased investment in the physical environment and facilities of the borough, they were concerned that there might not be within the Council sufficient project management skills to ensure the effective delivery of such a programme of capital investment. The Committee would request that the Executive make adequate provision within the capital programme for project management staff and that the Capital Board closely monitors its future delivery.

Staff Capacity and Recruitment

With regard to the growth options for the revenue budget similar concerns were expressed in connection to the ability of the Council to sustain growth in some key services given the recruitment and retention problems currently being faced by the public sector in London. The Committee noted the following services as being particularly vulnerable:-

- Planning
- Environmental enforcement services
- Children's Social Services.
- Benefits assessors.
- Auditors

While the Deputy Leader provided examples to the Committee of the proactive work the Council is undertaking in training and developing staff to fill key skills shortages these are valuable long-term solutions that may not assist with immediate staffing concerns. The Executive is asked to consider the staffing implications of their final budget proposals and the impact they may have on sustaining existing service standards.

Environment

We welcome the inclusion of the recommendations of the Overview Task group on waste and recycling within the Executive's growth options and would stress the importance of improving the Council's performance on recycling. We would however ask the Executive to consider whether the proposed investment is sufficient to achieve the nationally required levels of performance within the specified time.

The issue of enviro-crime is one high on the list of local residents' concerns and one which Members believe the Council must make a more effective response to. The growth proposals around tackling anti-social behaviour and enviro-crime are positive, but Members would wish to see these delivered in a co-ordinated manner across service areas with the involvement of residents and local businesses. We welcome the commitment to ensure that local councillors will be involved in development of such schemes. We would emphasis the importance of effective co-ordination and management to take forward these proposals to achieve the maximum improvement in the quality of the local environment.

Social Services

The Committee noted the considerable improvement in the financial management arrangements within Social Services and sought reassurance that any future growth in Social Services would be directed towards improving and expanding the range and quality of services available to the most vulnerable residents. The Deputy Leader outlined the positive steps that had been taken in stabilising the staffing situation in social services, reducing agency costs and improving procurement practices to ensure value for money is achieved. He highlighted the growth options for social services represented real enhancements to services, while the expenditure related to avoiding bed-blocking fines should be seen as providing a better level of care for older people leaving hospital. The Committee welcome these reassurances but would request the Executive to ensure measures to achieve value for money in social services expenditure are continued in any future growth.

Cross cutting issues in the Corporate Strategy

The Council's Corporate Strategy 2002-2006 is specifically designed to address local issues in a cross-cutting manner. Members were concerned that there was no available analysis of the budget in terms of the needs and priorities of the Corporate Strategy. Whilst they accepted that many of the growth bids could be related to the Corporate Strategy, it seemed to them essential that the budgetary process should have as a primary criterion the resources required to deliver the Corporate Strategy. Whilst it may be an administrative necessity subsequently to ascribe growth in terms of the conventional service structures, we would expect henceforth all bids for resources be considered in the light of

their contribution to the overall resources needed to achieve agreed corporate strategy aims; and that thereby cross-cutting solutions are encouraged.

Revenues and Benefits

While we recognise that significant work has been undertaken to improve the management arrangements, training and IT systems within the Revenue and Benefits service, the inherited backlog of work has so far prevented these improvements being translated into a better service as experienced by the users. We would ask the Executive to keep in mind the need to see some real improvements in the quality of customer service and processing times in the area of benefits and maintaining close monitoring of the Capita contract to improve revenue collection. Not only do delays in payment have a major impact on the quality of peoples life, but this is a critical area for the Council's overall CPA rating.

Special Educational Needs

Members were concerned to see such a substantial and unforeseen overspend in the area of Special Educational Needs. While all increases in demand for the service may not be able to be predicted - such as cases moving into the borough - we would expect that requests for growth are soundly based on analysis of likely future needs. In addition, the imminent findings of the Best Value review of the service need to be fully considered and, in particular, to address the need to provide the optimum number of in-borough places and to explore collaborative arrangements with neighbouring boroughs. We would request the Executive to consider these comments with regard to the most cost effective long-term investment in this service, particularly with regard to 'spend to save projects' and dealing with transport requirements.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment - CPA

The Committee supports the Executive's ambition to achieve an excellent rating for Council services in future rounds of the CPA, where this aim is convergent with achieving the locally defined priorities in the Corporate Strategy. The Deputy Leader emphasised the compatible nature of CPA performance objectives and the priorities already identified by Members particularly around services, such as waste management, sports services, benefits and children's services. Members of the Overview Committee recognise that in order to deliver the Corporate Strategy and the CPA targets for improvement high standards of performance across the Council are required. We would request the Executive to take into account the likely resources required to achieve national performance targets when assessing the balance of priorities within the budget 2004/05.

We commend our above comments and proposals to your consideration in finalising the Budget. We should be glad to receive your response to them.

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 20th January 2004 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Nerva (Chair), Councillor Thompson, (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Arnold, Cribbin, Farrell, Freeson, Halder, Moloney, Sattar-Butt, Sengupta, Van Colle and Wharton together with voting co-optees Mrs Bondzi-Simpson and Mr Lorenzato and non-voting co-optee Dr Levison.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Blackman, Kabir and B M Patel

Councillors Coughlin (Deputy Leader of the Council), Duffin, Kagan, Lyon and R S Patel also attended the majority of the meeting.

1. Chair's Introduction

The Chair welcomed Members to the meeting of the Overview Committee to consider and develop proposals for the Council's budget for 2004-05. He suggested, and it was agreed, that items 4 and 6 on the agenda be taken together as a general discussion of the budget and its implications for the Corporate Strategy. He also circulated prepared questions for the Director of Finance and the Deputy Leader from both himself and the Vice-Chair. It was agreed that these questions would be asked by Members around the table.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting – 22nd October 2003

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22nd October 2003 be approved as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

Councillor Thompson took the opportunity to update Members on the progress of the Post Office Closures Overview Task Group. He explained that they were in the process of arranging the first meeting and noted that there was a tight timetable in order to respond to consultation. It was noted that the task group would be liaising with Postwatch, the independent watchdog for postal services in the UK.

4. Update on 2004/05 Budget with Regard to the Corporate Strategy 2002-06

Stephen Hughes (Director of Finance) gave a presentation, for which slides were circulated, in support of his report updating Members on recent significant announcements from the Government based around the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement and other developments.

The presentation covered the main areas of capital, external finance, growth and savings and Council Tax levels. The Committee also had before them for their consideration a report setting out some of the issues in relating the Executive's spending priorities to the Corporate Strategy.

5. Questions of the Deputy Leader of the Council

The Committee had the opportunity to ask questions of the Deputy Leader of the Council and the Director of Finance regarding the administration's proposals for the 2004/05 budget. Councillor Thompson began the questioning by asking how the difference between the total budget proposals and an appropriate rise in Council Tax could be reconciled. He was advised that there was a limited scope for further savings and that although the review of fees and charges was due in March 2004, it was not expected that significant sums would emerge from this. It was therefore seen as preferable that discussion should focus on the acceptance and rejection of growth bids depending upon the Council's priorities. Reference was also made to the Government's desire to keep Council Tax rises lower than in the previous year and the reported threat of capping. It was noted that thus far no figure had been revealed as a level at which capping would be instigated and suggested that any capping would only be instigated once Council budgets were finally agreed.

Councillor Freeson welcomed the proposals for an increase in expenditure on the capital programme. However, he expressed concern as to whether the Council had sufficient project management resources to deliver the capital projects on time and within budget. He was advised that provision was included in the budget for increasing the capacity of the Council to deliver the capital programme. Councillor Coughlin emphasised the importance of the Prudential Code and the role of the Capital Board in monitoring the capital programme.

A question was asked regarding the amount already spent and proposed to be spent on repairs to pavements and roads. It was noted that grants for this kind of work were often allocated at short notice and thus it was intended that the package over three years would enable officers to plan and manage contracts. These would again be monitored by the Capital Board.

Councillor Farrell made reference to the prioritisation of waste management within the growth proposals in the budget. Councillor Coughlin agreed that the provision of a civic amenity site and additional recycling facilities were a high priority, together with an appropriate education programme. The high level of public concern regarding enviro-crime was also discussed and it was noted that an enviro-crime officer had been in post for one year and that this had had significant impact. As with waste management, it was recognised that this was a cross-cutting issue requiring work with other agencies. It was hoped to have five additional officers who would roll out enviro-crime work across the Borough. Capacity issues were again raised and also the need to balance investment in new services with enabling existing services to deliver more. Councillor Coughlin concurred that the Council should strengthen what

was already in place as a first priority and assured the Committee that local Ward Members would be consulted on local initiatives. Councillor Van Colle made reference to the recent problems with the Town Hall boiler and expressed the view that the opportunity should be taken to install a recycling boiler in such a key Council building. It was agreed that this possibility would be investigated.

Reference was made to the recent unforecast demands on the Council's budget; particularly in funding Special Educational Needs. It was agreed that this figure would need to be put back into the Council's balances. The view was expressed that the figures in this regard were robust at this stage. Councillor Wharton enquired about the balances of the Borough's schools, which had helped cushion the schools for cost increases in the current year but would not perhaps in future years. Stephen Hughes explained that there was not detailed monitoring of individual schools' balances but that the LEA were aware of any schools that were in difficulty in this regard. It was suggested that as the overall budget was increasing perhaps the Council's balances should be increased in line with this. However, the Director of Finance expressed the view that, on current information, the Council required a minimum of £4m in balances as the important factor was the assessment of risks within the budget. Nonetheless, the Committee noted that these risks would be reviewed before the final budget report.

The Committee enquired what steps had been taken to ensure that the Special Educational Needs budget could in future be contained within the available funding and, in particular, whether more could be done to bring provision back into Brent. It was noted that a Best Value Review was currently looking at this issue and would be suggesting a change in approach as currently special schools within the Borough were not providing for the needs that were in existence within the Borough and had some empty spaces, while Brent residents were attending facilities out of borough. The difficulties arising from families with special educational needs moving into the Borough and becoming the Borough's responsibility were noted.

Councillor Moloney asked about the budget within Social Services and stressed the need to protect the most vulnerable in society. He asked whether the proposals for growth in 2004/05 represented real enhancement to the range and quality of Social Services available to local people, or, whether they were merely funding inflation cost and more increases in pay. He was advised that the wage increases were covered separately within the budget and therefore the growth indicated was in real service provision. The Committee noted that there was a constant review of the cost of placements in line with the Council's desire to be a two-star authority in terms of Social Services. Councillor Moloney also asked a question in respect of the proposed level of investment to prevent the Council incurring fines for bed-blocking related to the forecast for the likely level of fines if these preventative measures were not taken. He was advised that the intention was to stop the Council being fined through better provision of services. The aim was to address needs through a positive approach to service improvement in partnership with the health authority rather than a negative approach of simply

avoiding fines. The Director of Finance was also asked why there had been such large increases in the forecast capital expenditure by Social Services. He advised members that it was primarily a case of existing bids being reclassified rather than a real increase in capital expenditure.

The budget proposals in respect of the poorly performing Revenue and Benefits Service were discussed and it was noted that extra growth in this area had been proposed subsequent to the Council's 1st reading debate. The Committee was advised that the three-year plan for the recovery of this service since it had returned in-house allowed for a decrease in service before improvement began to show. It was suggested that significant investment was necessary in order to achieve the step change and turn it into a service that was going forward, which would be important for the CPA. It was also noted that, to achieve national standards, the service should be fully staffed and that Brent was close to achieving these standards. However, some temps were still in post because they were filling positions that would become obsolete following reorganisation.

Recruitment and retention issues for the whole Council were then discussed and it was noted that the ALG was currently developing a strategy to address this across London. It was suggested that the best way to address this issue was to become a better Council that would attract aspiring people to work at it. In respect of the Benefits Service, the Council was adopting the Department of Work and Pensions approach and, through its trainee scheme, increasing the supply of benefits assessors as well as looking abroad for recruits. Thus more imaginative schemes and methods were being used rather than merely increasing salaries in key positions. The suggestion was made to make links with local universities and it was noted that the Planning Service had a graduate scheme and that there was a London-wide scheme for recruiting accountants into local government.

The Chair asked to what extent the proposed budget would equip the Council to achieve excellence under the CPA. Councillor Coughlin expressed the view that the current policy direction was appropriate and that there was often a conjunction between what the administration sought to achieve and what was required by the CPA. The Deputy Leader was then asked whether innovative service delivery options were being encouraged on a Council-wide basis, as it was suggested that the new growth proposals did not indicate significant cross-cutting development. He explained that growth bids came from service areas and were listed as such but that there was co-operation in drawing up these bids.

Councillor Thompson requested an analysis of the budget against the five objectives in the Corporate Strategy and it was agreed that once the budget was final and agreed this would be done. The analysis would show Members which growth was statutory, which in line with Corporate Strategy and which for achievement under the CPA.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and the Director of Finance were thanked for their time.

6. Response of the Overview Committee

The Overview Committee then discussed the comments and proposals that they would wish to be put forward to the Executive in light of their consideration of the budget options and the Corporate Strategy. Members were reminded that this was the second year in which the process of the Overview Committee considering the budget and feeding proposals to the Executive had been in place and that in the previous year the wording had not been agreed at the meeting. Instead, the Chair and officers had produced a document which suggested comments and proposals and this was circulated to all members of the Committee for comment before being presented to the Executive.

It was proposed that this year, similarly, the Chair and Vice-Chair would work together with officers, taking into account the comments made at the meeting, to produce the said document. The Chair then invited Members to take the opportunity to raise any issues or concerns that they wanted included but which had not already been discussed. It was emphasised that the draft would be sent to Members for comment and that once cleared through correspondence it would go forward to the Executive with the approval of Overview Committee members.

Councillor Thompson expressed the view that the most general concern centred around whether the scale of budget increase proposed could be delivered effectively and within the financial year. It was agreed that the Council's capacity to manage growth was the chief concern and Councillor Wharton expressed a specific concern about those proposals from Environment in respect of delivering better regulation. These were likely to involve large numbers of new staff being recruited at one time and at a time when other boroughs would also be recruiting to similar positions. The Chair concurred that it was important that the Council had the ability to achieve what was desired through its own internal organisation and with recognition of the external factors.

Councillor Van Colle then expressed the view that the Committee had not satisfactorily discussed prioritisation and asked that reference be made to this within the response which was sent to the Executive.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the Chair and Vice-Chair work together with officers to produce a report on behalf of the Committee;
- (ii) that the draft of this response would be circulated to all committee members for comment prior to it being passed on to the Executive.

7. Any Other Urgent Business

Councillor Freeson gave notice that at the next meeting he would be requesting that, as part of the Overview Committee's work programme, an Overview Task Group be established to examine the scope and means for developing the social economy. The Chair took the opportunity to invite any other suggestions for the Overview Committee's Work Programme and ask that they be notified to him and officers in advance of the next meeting.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

N NERVA
Chair