

Extract from Minutes - Council Meeting 29th November 2004

FIRST READING DEBATE ON 2005/2006 BUDGET

14. 1st Reading Debate – Priorities for the Administration/2005-06 Budget

The Leader introduced the reports of the Executive and Director of Finance which highlighted the achievements of the Administration against the priorities established in the Corporate Strategy. She reported with pride on:

- the best ever examination results
- two star ratings for Social Services and for Cultural Services
- corporate Investors in People
- not one finding of maladministration by the Ombudsman in the last two years
- the rebuilding of Brent including the new national stadium, new housing in South Kilburn, Stonebridge and Chalkhill

The Leader referred to the difference the Council had made within her own Ward and the more general improvements that had taken place across the Borough. She stated that she wanted to see the process of improvement continue and that the budget for 2005/06 would provide the financial framework to do this. The Leader criticised the plans of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in seeking Council tax reductions and their plans for capitalisation. She stated that she wished to see a greater focus next year on fighting crime, the environment and the green agenda. She wanted to see a continuation of the tough stance taken on anti-social behaviour. She wanted to see an extension of the Warden Service and for the Council to continue to work closely with the Police and other partners in tackling crime. She wanted to see continued improvements in refuse collection and more recycling. The Leader stated that it was the Administration's intention to ensure improvements in all areas of the Council's activity were maintained.

Councillor Coughlin stated that this budget was for the last year of the current Administration's term before the elections in May 2006 and that the Council's promises to local people that it would deliver on improvements to services would be maintained. He pointed out that the report of the Director of Finance did not set out the Executive's programme but rather presented a complete package of the Council's statutory commitments and aspirations in order that all Members could contribute their ideas for consideration for inclusion in the final budget set. He explained that appendix 5 to the Director of Finance's report showed current best, mid and worst estimates for the percentage Council tax increase and these projections showed that Members needed to balance their contribution with the need to identify appropriate funding. It was clear from these estimates that careful decisions were still required on formulating the Council's final budget for 2005/06.

Councillor Sayers acknowledged the improvements to the Cricklewood Broadway area by the erection of Christmas lights this year and better pavements but felt the Council was letting local residents down by not dealing quickly enough with vandalised car parking ticket machines. This meant that while the machines were out of order people could park for free whilst local residents had to pay for their permits. He also referred to Dollis Hill House as a blot on the landscape. Councillor Sayers made a request that the Council take advantage of the site in Gladstone Park returned to the Council by London Electricity by providing changing rooms.

Councillor Lorber stated that the level of Council tax under a Liberal Democrat government would be nil because it would be abolished. He referred to the 30% increase in Council tax since the elections in 2002 but pointed to the Government as the main cause of this. He referred to the extra expenditure faced by the Council caused by the introduction of the Children's Bill, the new licensing arrangements and by far the biggest area, that of maintaining the Pension Fund. He also referred to the cost of Members' allowances. Councillor Lorber moved a motion circulated in the name of the Liberal Democrat Group noting the increase in Council Tax in Brent and the principal causes of this and setting out ways by which the Brent element of the Council tax should be frozen. He also produced a petition comprising over 1,000 signatures organised by the Liberal Democrat Group calling on the Council and the Government not to increase the Council Tax again next year.

Councillor Farrell spoke on behalf of Councillor Harrod who was unable to be present at the meeting due to a recent accident. He was asking that priority be given to providing adequate facilities for young people. Whilst acknowledging the need to be tough on anti-social behaviour and in the use of anti-social behaviour orders, he felt the Council needed to follow this action through with an increase in youth facilities. He asked that the Council look at all approaches that might be made to partner agencies with a view to meeting this challenge.

Councillor O'Sullivan referred to the Council's oversight in not identifying households in the Chalkhill area as liable for Council Tax and stated that the residents were being falsely accused of not having provided the relevant information.

Councillor Thompson referred to the proposal to abolish the funding for supporting service user consultative forums. Whilst he understood that some of the forums did not require this support, he felt others still did and asked that this proposal be reconsidered. He also asked for greater enforcement of parking restrictions in CPZs. The Kilburn area had seen a great improvement in this but there remained tensions between residents and traders which greater enforcement would resolve. Councillor Thompson also felt that with the opening of the new national stadium there might be a case for a tourist office facility in the area. He asked the Council to consider how it could best welcome people from all over the world and called for resources to research this and develop options and any associated business plan to support any

proposals. He suggested this could be done by referring the matter to Overview Committee to work up.

Councillor Rands stated that the debate amounted to a wish list because the Council did not have available to it the provisional finance settlement from the Government. He referred to many aspects contained within the report that in his view amounted to unnecessary expenditure. He also drew attention to the 10% of people that did not pay the Council Tax. All this led to a best estimate at this stage of a 13½% increase in the Council Tax.

Councillor Sengupta referred to the closure nearly 16 years ago of Kingsbury swimming pool and the subsequent history of failed attempts to replace it. He expressed his confidence in the Leader and her Executive in delivering on the current scheme but asked that the Council look to make provision to build a public swimming pool on this site.

Councillor R Blackman referred to the position the Council was in, in not knowing what the final grant settlement would be and the huge external influences on the Council's budget. He countered the Leader's rejection of capitalisation and stated that without such a measure other savings would have to be found to get the Council Tax increase down to the lower projection figure. He referred to the figure included in the report for the GLA precept which was higher than what the Mayor of London had indicated it would be. Councillor Blackman stated that there was nothing in the report that indicated a target figure the Executive had in mind for the Council Tax increase and consequently what growth and savings proposals they were prepared to make. He submitted that without this information it made the whole 1st reading debate meaningless.

Councillor Moher referred to the proposals for recycling waste which showed how important the Council considered this to be. He stated that the new Twyford Depot was efficient, accessible and had helpful staff. It accommodated a wide range of recycled goods but more funds were needed to publicise its existence, including road directional signs, schools programme and a pub and shops programme to encourage people to take more responsibility for the recycling of waste.

Councillor H B Patel stated that crime was on the increase in the Borough. He also referred to the list of savings including stopping arrangements for paying Council tax by credit card, holding production of the Council's A to Z leaflet, cutting staff training, introducing parking charges at libraries, cutting Member training, increasing fee charges and submitted all these areas were inappropriate as savings items. He also asked that more money be spent on improving the condition of roads in the Borough.

Councillor Crane picked up on the message from Councillor Harrod concerning provision for young people. He stated that the Council had heard through the events that took place during Local Democracy Week what young people wanted. Councillor Crane also referred to the pressure on providing

intermediary care for the elderly because of rising costs. The Social Care Scrutiny Panel had heard evidence of this and the Council needed to be aware of it.

Councillor Wharton referred to two of the biggest growth items as being ward working and the organic waste collection service. He submitted that ward working created an unnecessary bureaucracy that duplicated the work that local councillors should already be doing and should therefore be scrapped. The introduction of the Organic Waste Collection Service had seen an increase in the amount of material going to landfill sites. Councillor Wharton submitted that what used to be kept and re-used at home was now being collected and that the scheme should be scrapped and people encouraged to compost at home. He expressed his sympathy for the request for extra resources for youth facilities in the Borough. He felt one way this could be achieved could be through the better use of school buildings out of hours by funding the additional caretakers' costs.

Councillor Fiegel submitted a case for providing a nursery school at Byron Court Primary School and urged this be considered within the budget.

Councillor Nerva asked that more resources be devoted to introducing a broader range of services undertaken by StreetCare staff. He also referred to the imminent ending of the Kilburn Single Regeneration Budget and hoped resources could be found to continue supporting the joint work undertaken with Camden. Councillor Nerva also asked that the Council work with the Primary Care Trust to reduce/ban smoking in public places.

The Leader responded to the 1st reading. She pointed out that it was not the first time a delay in the announcement of the grant settlement figure had occurred. She undertook to look further at the points made regarding youth provision. She did not accept the point raised by Councillor O'Sullivan. With regard to supporting the service user consultative forums, she stated this should come from the service areas. The Leader disagreed with the points made by Councillor Rands and pointed out that MORI had made it clear that they regarded the Council as communicating well with its local residents and that good communication was at the centre of providing good services. She pointed out that residents were pursued on a monthly basis for payment of Council tax. With regard to Kingsbury Pool, the Leader explained this was a very difficult issue but that the Administration would be reminding officers of the importance of this scheme. She stood by the introduction of charging for parking at libraries as a fair charge. The Leader referred to ward working as a development whose time had come. She expressed her total opposition to the call to scrap the organic waste collection. She accepted the point made about greater use of school buildings out of hours as a facility for the youth in the Borough. She undertook to look into the provision of a nursery school at Byron Primary School. Finally, she stated that the point made regarding greater cross-working by StreetCare staff would be looked at.

The motion submitted by Councillor Lorber was put to the vote and declared LOST.

(Councillors Allie, Chavda, V Brown, Lorber, C J Patel and Ms Shaw wished their assent to the above motion to be recorded).

RESOLVED:-

that the reports from the Executive and the Director of Finance on the 1st Reading of the 2005/06 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.