

*****DRAFT*****

**EXTRACT from
Notes**

of the seventy-eighth meeting of the
Harrow POP Panel
held at the Civic Centre on
4 February 2009

PART II (Open/Public Meeting)

Item 2: Harrow Council Budget 2009-10

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Donna Edwards was pleased to meet today with the POP Panel, some members of the Older People's Reference Group (OPRG) and interested older members of the public to provide an overview, and discuss aspects, of the Draft Budget for Harrow Council.

The Draft Budget had been considered at the December Cabinet meeting. It was now being finalised for the 12 February Cabinet meeting, when it would be available in Libraries and on the Harrow website, and would then go to the Council on 19 February. Panel members and visitors were most concerned that the final Budget was imminent and there had been little, if any, opportunity to input to or influence it.

Donna circulated a handout, "Stakeholder Meetings on Budget, January 2009" (*available from the POP Office*) and highlighted and expanded upon a number of the items, including:

- The Council's focus and work was now geared to its Vision (*to be recognised as one of the best London Councils by 2012 in a borough that is cosmopolitan, confident and cohesive*) and Draft Corporate Priorities for 2009-10 (*Better Streets, Improve Support for Vulnerable People and Build Stronger Communities*)

- The Council was in a difficult financial position, already being a relatively low-spending Council and with limited flexibility as large parts of the Budget were outside its control (e.g., funding for Schools)
- The Council had saved some £35 million over the past three years but had low reserves (only £3 million against an annual spend of £500 million) and historically received a poor Government settlement
- The impact of the economic downturn was being felt, particularly with regard to loss of funds from previously proposed sales of land/property and loss of interest earned on balances
- The financial pressures had been quantified as £3.5 million with another £1 million having to be found within Directorates
- The Funding Gap (the difference between planned spending and anticipated income) had been identified as £4.2 million for 2009-10:

<i>Inflation</i>	£5.3m
<i>Investment in services</i>	£4.6m
<i>Technical changes</i>	£4.8m

	£14.7m
<i>Efficiencies and Savings</i>	(£4.7m)

	£10m
<i>General Grant increase</i>	(£1.1m)
<i>Council Tax increase</i>	(£3m)
<i>Collection fund and tax base</i>	(£1.7m)

<i>Balance to find</i>	£4.2m

The Budget work between December and February was about reducing this Gap. The Council was striving to achieve the right balance between Council Tax, Service levels and risk

- Funding Gaps for 2010-11 and 2011-12 had been identified (at £8.2 million and £7.3 million).
- The Capital Programme 2009-10 comprised some £60 million of works, including Decent Homes, improvements to schools, Neighbourhood Resource Centres, improvements to Leisure facilities, new technology to improve services and investment in highways, lighting, transportation, parks and public conveniences. This year, no Capital receipts were anticipated to support the funding of this Programme.

During discussions with Donna, a number of matters were raised, including:

Investment in Services

- It was very much welcomed that Adult Services was one of the key areas for investment in the Budget, with £1.2 million growth in the Adult Services budget (the other area of investment was waste disposal). This

would assist in increasing efficiency whilst minimising impact on services.

Service Reviews

- Service reviews would be undertaken in order to ensure that the services were working as efficiently as possible, i.e., how was a service currently provided? Did it meet the needs of service users? Could it be delivered in a more cost effective way? However, it was emphasised that..
- a key endeavour of the Council was to ensure that front-line services were not affected by any savings sought and proposed
- It was understood from an OPRG discussion with Paul Najsarek that the cuts to be found in Catering would not affect the Meals on Wheels scheme. Financial details would have been useful.

Charging for Services

- Statutory services must be provided by the Council but other services may now need to be charged for. The Council would be seeking views and input from groups, Members and officers about how these services can be delivered as these were the people who have the insight and experience the Council needs in order to consider this.

Staff and Councillor Costs

- Although included in a bulk figure for 'efficiency savings' any reductions in staff numbers and cuts in remuneration of councillors and staff should be clearly identified in Budget presentations (***Donna** to report this*)
- Reductions in staff numbers would adversely affect service delivery and also reduce the morale of staff remaining
- There were no proposed cuts in allowances for councillors (Harrow still had the lowest allowances in London) and a staff pay award of approximately 2% was included in the figures
- Expenditure upon foreign visits by staff and councillors should be denoted (***Donna** to confirm*).

Housing: Council Blocks (*particularly Churchill Place*)

- Issues relating to the quality and value for money of service charges in Council blocks had been raised at the Leaseholders' Support Group and were to be pursued. Increases in service charges for leaseholders under the Budget must reflect an improvement in service
- Proper and comprehensive notification of Decent Homes workings at Council blocks should be given to leaseholders, together with any other assistance. The noise disruption and distress was considerable (especially to night-workers) and had to be suffered by people not benefitting from the works (***Donna** to confirm method of publication of full programme(s) and the requirement of advice to both tenants and leaseholders*).

Toilets

- The Council's position regarding the provision of public conveniences, particularly relating to the potential of paying shops to allow use of their facilities, was not clear to the POP Panel
- It was understood that Harrow had declined to participate in such a scheme (as proposed by the Mayor of London) but there had been no information or public consultation upon this
- Details of the Capital Programme investment (re-opening/refurbishing and/or new toilets) would assist in this regard (**Donna** to confirm).

Build Stronger Communities

- The amount(s) allocated to the Build Stronger Communities budget(s) should be identified (**Donna** to confirm)
- The amount received as specific Government funding towards this (i.e., further to successful bidding) should be confirmed, as should the key activities.

Regional Working and Technology

- In order to achieve more efficiencies, the potential of technology and of cross-borough/regional working (West London, pan-London) were being pursued.

Very importantly, the Panel and visitors present confirmed that:

Public Consultation

- the POP Panel and OPRG seek the opportunity to input to and influence the Council Budget
- the POP Panel and OPRG require to be included in the **earliest stages of Budget consideration (i.e., throughout the year)**, assisting Council officers in identifying and discussing potential priorities and focus
- additionally, a **Budget consultation and information meeting for older people** (i.e., for interested older members of the public as well as OPRG and the POP Panel) should be held annually, in very early January
- An appropriate "panel" of officers and councillors would be required for this meeting, to respond to the both specific and cross-departmental questions
- Supporting documentation, with more detailed (financial) Budget proposals would be required to be available prior to and at the meeting. This might facilitate some advance notice of questions to be asked.

Donna was sincerely thanked for her attendance and useful overview. Both POP Panel members and visitors looked forward to a more detailed and comprehensive opportunity/opportunities to input to the 2010-11 Budget than had been possible for this year's Budget.