

Budget Scrutiny Café – Chair’s Report

The Scrutiny Café was held on Thursday 17th January 2013. It was the first event of this kind at the Council and so the format was untested. A major factor influencing attendance was the unfortunate clash with Parish and Town Council meetings, which had recently been called to discuss the precepts. Elected members were also affected by the unusual bad weather red warning and snowy conditions; however all of the attendees who braved the wintery conditions felt the event to be beneficial.

There were 8 officers, including the Chief Executive, available for questions on their individual areas of responsibility, and 5 Cabinet Members on hand to answer queries on their portfolios. Those attending were:

John Sellgren – Chief Executive

Kelvin Turner – Executive Director, Resources & Support Services

Neale Clifton – Executive Director, Regeneration & Development

Dave Adams – Executive Director, Operational Services

Dave Roberts – Head of Finance

Craig Turner – Principal Accountant

Mark Bailey – Head of Business Improvement & Partnerships

Simon Sowerby – Business Improvement Manager

Cllr Gareth Snell – Portfolio Holder, Communication, Transformation & Partnerships

Cllr Mike Stubbs – Portfolio Holder, Finance & Budget Management

Cllr Eddie Boden – Portfolio Holder, Regeneration, Planning and Town Centres Development

Cllr Tony Kearon – Portfolio Holder, Safer Communities

Cllr John Williams – Portfolio Holder, Stronger & Active Neighbourhoods

Officers considered the night to be a very useful experience, as it gave an opportunity for one-to-one sessions with elected members in a more informal setting. Cabinet were also pleased with the format as it allowed good exchanges between Councillors.

It was obvious that those attending were familiar with the draft budget, and it was commented that the preparation, detail and presentation of the report made it easy to read and understand.

The context of questions was recorded, to assist the Transformation & Resources Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 24th January 2013. The main themes were as follows:

Procurement

- A breakdown was requested of the £100k savings Are the projected savings achievable? (request for this to be supplied*)

Income

- How can this be maximised with regard to Streetscene/Environmental Services?

Grants

- Why had there been an underspend?

Staffing Efficiencies

- How would these be monitored and managed?
- What are the workload consequences of the removal of the Planning Policy Officer post? (request for this to be supplied*)
- The impact of efficiencies on staff and managing their welfare?
- Is anything in hand regarding shared services?

Town Centre

- Regeneration plans?
- What is the vision for the future?
- Ensuring value for money with the Town Centre Manager role?

Cuts to Local Government Funding

- What effect would the cuts have on priorities?

In summary the format of the evening worked well and it would be worthwhile to repeat the exercise in future years for the budget. Other scrutiny topics might also benefit from a café style event, and it was suggested that an occasional 'Cabinet Questions' could be introduced and follow along similar lines.

Cllr Elizabeth Shenton
Chair, Transformation & Resources Scrutiny