

# THE EXECUTIVE

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**Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive held on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2006 in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Monkton Park, Chippenham commencing at 7.00 p.m.**

**Present:** Councillor C. O’Gorman, Leader ..... in the Chair

Councillors A. L. Davis, H. M. Dixon, S. K. Doubell, D. J. E. Evans,  
G. Offord, C. Reid and O. J. Thomas.

**Non-Executive Councillors Present:** Councillors T. R. Sturgis and R. L. Tonge.

**Officers Present:** D. Burbidge (Chief Executive), L. Bell (Strategic Manager Community & Environment), H. Braid (Policy & Democratic Services Officer), A. Davies (Strategic Manager Planning Services), N. Fenwick (Strategic Manager Customer Services) D. Hodges (Finance Team Leader), and S. Pangbourne (Strategic Manager Corporate Services).

## **E169. Apologies for Absence**

An apology for absence had been received from Councillor C. R. Coleman.

## **E170. Public Question Time/Receipt of Petitions**

No public questions or petitions had been submitted.

## **E171. Questions from Non-Executive Councillors**

Several questions had been submitted by Councillor T. R. Sturgis in respect of Report No.7 on the agenda. The questions, together with the responses provided are attached to these Minutes as Appendix 1.



**E172. Minutes**

The Minutes of the Executive meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2006 (circulated on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2006) were considered.

**Resolved** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2006 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**E173. Declarations of Interest**

None.

**E174. Leader's Announcements**

None.

**E175. Draft Budget Proposals**

The Leader introduced the draft budget proposals with the following statement:

“Preparing a budget should be a straightforward – dare I say even simple – process.

Imagine you are writing your weekly shopping list or drafting an annual business plan you shouldn't allow yourself to get side-tracked by window shopping – what you should do - is plan to spend what you can afford and no more than that amount. It's like David Copperfield where Mr Macawber says

*“If a man had twenty pounds a year for his income, and spent nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy; but that if he spent twenty pounds one shilling he would be miserable...”* (I take it we all recall £.s.d.)

However, we are not living in Dickensian England; we live in a world that's far more exciting and a world that is constantly changing. When we look at our shopping list for this council our task is not quite so simple - We have to take into account the diverse and distinct needs of our widespread communities and customers and keep focused on our long term vision to improve North Wiltshire.

**Let's look at some of our achievements in 2005/06**

Our achievement in service and project delivery during the last 12 months is considerable. We have significantly improved our services and facilities for local people by focusing resources on delivering our Corporate Plan.

Examples of these achievements include:

- Our Young People's Council which continues to go from strength to strength, ensuring that the voice of our younger citizens informs our decision-making. We have also tackled engaging hard-to-reach young people, and a key highlight was the “Who gives a hoody?” conference held in October, attended by over 50 young people.

- By working in partnership with the County Council we now have kerbside recycling in more than 95% of our households, we have launched a green waste recycling scheme and are on schedule to meet our 2006 Government target for recycling of 18%.
- We have provided 141 new affordable homes so far this year and are set to achieve a total of 152 by the end of March – this represents a 52% increase on our target of 100.
- We have launched our new Economic Regeneration Strategy, following extensive consultation with the business community.
- We have significantly improved customer choice so that over 99% of our services can now be accessed electronically, as well as face to face, and we continue to strengthen our customer contact so that 92% of our customers visiting these offices are dealt with at their first point of contact.
- We have held our Local Plan Inquiry and kept our work for the new Local Development Framework on target.
- We have agreed plans for the new North Wiltshire Arts Centre.
- We have implemented the Licensing Act as a result of excellent and extremely hard work by both officers and members.
- We have adopted the first North Wiltshire Community Strategy and published local Community Plans in each of our five Community Areas. Supporting both the District-wide Local Strategic Partnership and the local Community Area Partnerships has enabled us to ensure the Council's resources are allocated to deliver local needs.

### **Focusing on Next Year's Budget (2006/07)**

The continuation budget for 2006/07, before any new growth, shows a surplus of £90 thousand. The figures now incorporate the final revenue support grant settlement, which was slightly more favourable than originally anticipated in November.

In line with good practice on risk management, the risks to this budget are identified. At worst case the revenue risks – set out in Annex 5 - could amount to just over £700 thousand. However, the risks are highly unlikely to materialise at this level. There is furthermore the comfort of our balances to cover problems in the short term. You will see that car parking income is shown in this risk assessment. The Section 151 Officer has endorsed the approach I have taken to dealing with the forthcoming decriminalisation of car parking. Any additional costs could be met by reserves or from identifying compensating savings in 2006/07. In principle it would be possible to agree that future surpluses could be used to offset any shortfalls in the early years.

### *Budget consultation response (revenue & capital)*

This year, for the first time, all members were invited to participate in two Policy Days (one in September and one in January) to give their views on the Council's priorities for the next 3 years and – just as importantly – to give their view on what they did not see as priorities. Members clearly stated that they wished to see investment into core services before any expansion of discretionary areas of work.

In response, my budget proposals include investment of £575 thousand into core services. A significant investment that should result in improved performance standards and customer satisfaction.

Members also agreed that local people should be more involved in making choices about service delivery and that the standard and level of service delivery needs to be based on public expectation and feedback. Members also acknowledged that there was a clear need to improve communication with all of our customers. To recognise this, I have included a budget growth item for communication and consultation so that we can strengthen our work in this area and ensure our approach is fully inclusive.

In addition to the Policy Days, questions were asked of the People's Voice panel and interactive sessions were run at each Area Committee and on the Council's Website. In the budget consultation carried out with the People's Voice panel, most of the Council's services were judged as providing value for money, including:

- Waste Collection and Recycling
- Sport/Leisure Opportunities
- Keeping public land free of litter and refuse
- Benefits service
- Planning applications service

In addition, over two thirds of respondents stated that they are satisfied with the way the council runs things and more respondents felt that services had improved over the last three years, as opposed to those that felt they had worsened. In all the budget consultation, people were clear that the areas where they wished to see the Council spend more money were:

- Keeping public land free of litter and refuse
- Recycling
- Affordable Housing and Homelessness
- Community Transport

You will see that the budget proposals respond to these aspirations by including growth for Cleansing and Amenities Services, for Housing services and for Concessionary Fares.

### **Revenue Growth (2006/07)**

The list of revenue growth bids put forward in the circulated budget report represents an ambitious programme of investment and improvement – mostly to core services, totalling £1.56 million. This would equate to a Council Tax rise of over 27% - an increase that I am sure you would agree would be totally unacceptable.

However, I believe that the majority of the growth bids identified in the report are important for the following reasons:

- They address the priorities identified by local people and members – (as I have just highlighted)
- We are investing in services that support people on low incomes through increasing Concessionary travel fares and improving the processing of benefit applications.

- We are investing in improvements to our core services – Our refuse collection and street cleaning services and our Housing and Homelessness services – and this investment will be underpinned by sound performance management to drive up standards.
- We are continuing to drive improvements for all our customers in the way they can access our services.

For these reasons, all except two items on the growth bids list identified in the report are supported in this budget. The two that are not being supported are:

- The mobile skatepark – members will recall that this matter was addressed at the Executive meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> February and a sound management decision was made.
- The reduction of the staff vacancy target – having consulted with officers, I consider that the organisation should be able to manage this ongoing saving through making efficiencies in processes and through active management of vacancies across the Council.

I have therefore agreed budgetary changes to meet these growth costs. These changes include efficiency savings and reduction in some discretionary areas of work.

### **Capital Programme and Growth (2006/07 to 2008/09)**

Through our capital programme, I propose to continue to invest £2 million a year in affordable housing schemes, based on the high level identified need for affordable homes in North Wiltshire. New capital schemes have been factored into the budget to meet priorities identified in the consultation process, including:

- We are increasing our housing improvement grants budget, by nearly £500 thousand, specifically to support disabled people.
- We are continuing to fund streetwork improvements across the District and we are providing funding for additional vehicles for litterpicking.
- We are providing funding to plan for the future use of town centre sites that are important in maintaining a buoyant local economy; and
- We are continuing to invest in new technology to improve our customer contact and enable us to work with other authorities to provide more seamless and efficient services for local people.

The risks associated with the capital programme are identified in Annex 6. All but one of the risks is considered to be low.

### **Balances**

Balances at the start of 2005/06 were very healthy, standing at just over £5.2 million. Following the revised budget for 2005/06, which was agreed by Council in November, it is anticipated that £776 thousand will be required to balance the 2005/06 budget. This brings our anticipated balances at the start of 2006/07 to £4.495 million (well above the agreed minimum balance of 3.5% of gross expenditure which equates to approximately £1.5 million).

I do not propose to use any of our reserves to fund recurring commitments as this would only store up problems for the future. I have, however, proposed that some of our reserves be used to fund non-recurring growth bids, in line with our section 151 Officer's advice. In total these bids amount to £256 thousand in 2006/07. This leaves us with strong reserves and in a sound financial position for the future.

In addition, later in the year, I shall be considering, with my Executive, how reserves could be used to fund invest-to-save proposals, for example, those linked to the recent Carbon Trust report on energy efficiency.

### **Proposals to balance the 2006/07 budget**

Based on the position I have outlined and the growth I propose that we fund, there would be a budget gap of approximately £1 million.

The budget consultation showed that 62% of the People's Voice Panel would be prepared to accept a Council Tax increase in order to see service levels maintained or improved. (Of those, more than half were prepared to pay an increase of 5% or more.) The total savings and income increases I am putting forward to enable us to reach a balanced budget equate to £899 thousand.

Members will be aware that we are set each year the challenge of making efficiency savings, so that we can move funding from non-priority areas (and back-office support services) into front-line customer-facing services. My budget proposals contain within them some clear examples of cashable efficiency savings we will achieve in 2006/07 to allow us to focus on our priorities. These examples include:

- Realignment of resource within Community & Environment discretionary areas of work;
- Procurement saving in respect of stationery, achieved through the adoption of new technology;
- Ensuring that our Building Control service becomes self-financing;

In addition to the efficiency savings shown in the budget balancing papers, we continue to make good savings through our joint procurement work in partnership with other Wiltshire authorities, in particular on IT systems, which has reduced the pressure on our ICE (Improving the Customer Experience) Programme work.

In addition to these efficiency savings, there are other key income streams that we will use to balance the budget growth. These include:

- Additional development control income, in line with the impact of national fee increases;
- Local Authority Business Growth Incentive grant, that we are due to receive from the Government, recognising the increased business rate base.

This then leaves a balance of £196 thousand to be met from Council Tax, which equates to an increase of 3.4%. In proposing this increase, I am aware that this is slightly higher than the prevailing rate of inflation. However, as I have outlined, included within my proposal is a growth list of over £1.5 million.

I draw your attention to our Medium Term Finance Plan, as circulated, to demonstrate that my proposals are affordable over the 3 year period of the Plan. I would also remind you that my budget proposals leave the Council's balances in an extremely healthy position. This provides us with a healthy contingency looking to the future and provides us with opportunities to support invest-to-save projects, which will greatly assist in reducing the continuing expenditure in years to come.

My proposed Council Tax rise of 3.4% is equivalent to just £4.04 per year extra for a Band D property, which is just 7.7 pence per week.

In summary, the budget I put before you provides for a significant investment into our core services which should result in enhanced performance and an increase in customer satisfaction. It achieves this investment by reducing the focus on some discretionary areas of work – in line with members' stated views and feedback – whilst maintaining our commitment to supporting the priorities identified in the North Wiltshire Community Strategy.”

Consideration was then given to Report No.7 (circulated with the agenda) which was to bring before the Executive the latest information concerning the proposed 2006/07 budget.

Consideration was also given to the following documentation:

- Report No.7 – Annex 1 (Amended Version) – circulated on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2006.
- Budget Consultation – Summary of Results and Links to Budget Decisions (circulated at the meeting).
- Budget 2006/07 – Efficiencies & Savings (circulated at the meeting)
- Medium Term Finance Plan – February 2006 (circulated at the meeting).

Issues discussed during consideration of this item included:

- The efficiency savings identified for Community & Environment will be achieved by the merging of the Asset Management & Regeneration Team with the Estates & Design Team. This realignment will enable resources to be directed to ensure improved liaison with Planning Services and to the Housing Team to ensure that BVPIs are met.
- The Audit Commission has recommended that the New Offices Sinking Fund should be included within the Council's accounts. Details of the activity on the fund will be provided to Members.
- The figures for the NWLL PPM are based on the current position, but will be reviewed. This review, together with an assessment of the buildings, will be undertaken through the Leisure Provision Board.
- Removal of the provision for the Overview & Scrutiny Assistant has been included following consultation with the Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The necessary support for the Scrutiny function can be found within existing resources.
- Members will be provided with details of bad debt provision in respect of Building Control Services.

**Recommended to Council that**

- (1) The revised continuation Revenue Budget for 2006/07 (as set out at Appendix 2) to these Minutes) be approved.**
- (2) The proposals for revenue growth (as set out at Appendix 3 to these Minutes) be included in the Revenue Budget for 2006/07.**
- (3) The Capital Programme for 2006/07 and the Outline Programme for 2007/08 and 2008/09 (as set out at Appendix 4 to these Minutes) be approved.**
- (4) The updated Medium Term Finance Plan (as set out at Appendix 5 to these Minutes) be noted.**
- (5) The Revenue and Capital risk assessments (as set out at Appendix 6 and 7 to these Minutes) be noted.**
- (6) The Corporate Plan priorities for 2006/07 (as set out at Appendix 8 to these Minutes) be approved.**
- (7) The measures to balance the Revenue Budget for 2006/07, having regard to feedback from public consultation (as summarised at Appendix 5 to these Minutes) be approved.**
- (8) A Band D Council Tax of £121.79 for North Wiltshire District Council for the year commencing 1<sup>st</sup> April 2006 be approved.**

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 7.25pm.

There were no members of the public present.

Signed: .....

Dated: .....