

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

At the Special Meeting of West Dunbartonshire Council held in the Council Chambers, Council Offices, Garshake Road, Dumbarton on Thursday, 9 February 2006 at 4.00 p.m.

Present: Provost Alistair Macdonald and Councillors George Black, Jim Bolla, Margaret Bootland, Dennis Brogan, Geoff Calvert, Gail Casey, Tony Devine, James Flynn, Jackie Maceira, Douglas McAllister, James McCallum, Linda McColl, Duncan McDonald, Margaret McGregor, Craig McLaughlin, Marie McNair, Connie O'Sullivan, Joe Pilkington*, Martin Rooney and Andy White.

*Arrived later in the meeting.

Attending: Tim Huntingford, Chief Executive; Gerry McNerney, Director of Corporate Services; Dan Henderson, Director of Development and Environmental Services; Bob Cook, Director of Education and Cultural Services; David McMillan, Director of Housing and Technical Services; Bill Clark, Acting Director of Social Work Services; David Connell, Head of Finance; Ronnie Dinnie, Head of Land services; Jim Pow, Manager of Finance (Housing and Technical Services); Stephen Brown, Head of Legal and Administrative Services and George Hawthorn, Senior Administrative Officer.

Apology: An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Councillor Denis Agnew.

Provost Macdonald in the Chair

BUDGET FORUM MEETING – 18 JANUARY 2006

8115 A report was submitted by the Chief Executive providing information on the points raised by community representatives at the public forum to discuss the Council's revenue budget for 2006/07.

8116 Having heard Councillor White and the Chief Executive in answer to Members' questions and following discussion, the Council agreed:-

- (1) to note the content of the report; and
- (2) that, in future and whenever possible, budget consultation meetings should be held in Council premises.

GENERAL SERVICES REVENUE ESTIMATES AND COUNCIL TAX

- 8117 A report was submitted by the Director of Corporate Services providing Council with sufficient information to:-
- (a) approve the General Services Revenue Estimates for 2006/2007;
 - (b) set the level of prudential reserves for 2006/2007;
 - (c) set the Council Tax level for 2006/2007; and
 - (d) agree the indicative Council Tax increases for 2007/08.
- 8118 It was further noted that the draft Revenue Estimates book, as referred to in the above report, had been circulated to all Members on 26 January 2006.
- 8119 At this point, copies of the Labour Administration's proposals for the General Services Budget (shown as Appendix 1 to these minutes) were circulated to all those present.

ADJOURNMENT

- 8120 Having heard Councillor Devine, the Council agreed to adjourn for a short period of time to allow Members sufficient time to read the proposals. At this point, copies of proposals tabled by Councillor McLaughlin (shown as Appendix 2 to these minutes) were circulated to all those present.
- 8121 The meeting reconvened at 4.25 p.m. with all those Members shown on the sederunt in attendance.

Note: Councillor Pilkington entered the meeting at this point.

- 8122 After thanking all officers involved in the preparation of the budget estimates for their hard work, Councillor Devine, seconded by Councillor White, moved:-

I commend the budget proposals set out in this document (see Appendix 1). Specifically, I move as follows:-

- (1) That a net General Services Revenue budget of £203,514,260 should be approved. This budget should be based on the draft estimates book issued by the Director of Corporate Services to all Members in January 2006, and subsequently updated by £631,100 of net management savings.
- (2) That the efficiency savings of £3,558,280 as described in Section 3 should be approved.
- (3) That the enhancements set out in Section 4 and valued at £350,000 should be approved.
- (4) That the transfer of £1,250,000 from the HRA Reserve to the General Fund Reserves be approved and that no reserves are applied to the budget.

- (5) That the 2006/07 Band D Council Tax should be set at £1,138. This represents an increase of 2.25% and assumes a collection rate of 96.0%.
- (6) We have succeeded in honouring our commitment to keep the increases as low as possible for 2006/07. We are not, at this time, setting an indicative increase for 2007/08 until discussions involving the Scottish Executive and COSLA regarding the level of funding allocated for that year have been completed. We are determined to maintain our manifesto pledge to minimise tax increases each year.

8123 As an amendment, Councillor McLaughlin, seconded by Councillor McGregor, moved:-

8124 That this Council agrees that the structure of any organisation should be to maximise the service to its users. The present situation and proposed management review does little to benefit frontline services.

8125 Therefore this Council agrees a complete review of the Council's structures placing frontline services at the core of that review.

8126 The review should take place over the next few months with consultations taking place with staff, unions and the public.

8127 The review should use the attached appendix (see Appendix 2) as a jumping off point for discussion. The report should also look at the political decision making structure for additional streamlining.

8128 In addition this Council does not agree to the transfer of £1.25m from the HRA account.

8129 Furthermore this Council acknowledges that the current financial position of the Council is entirely of the making of the Labour Party.

8130 The Labour dominated Executive is starving local government while protecting and increasing their own bureaucracy.

8131 This Council acknowledges that it is possible to set a zero Council Tax rise even within the immense financial constraints placed on us by the Labour Executive and Labour Administration.

8132 Setting the Council Tax has become little more than a bun fight – with each council attempting to better the other with the lowest amount.

8133 To that end this Council agrees to no longer set its Council Tax on the same day as other councils. Budgets should now be set at the end of February.

8134 At this point, the Head of Finance was heard in response to a Member's question.

- 8135 On a vote being taken, 5 Members voted for the amendment and 16 for the motion, which was accordingly declared carried.

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) ESTIMATES 2006/2007

- 8136 A report was submitted by the Director of Housing and Technical Services making recommendations in respect of the HRA Estimates and rent levels for 2006/2007 and HRA Prudential Reserves for 2005/2006.
- 8137 Having thanked the Director of Housing and Technical Services and all staff who were involved in the preparation of the HRA Estimates process, Councillor Flynn, seconded by Councillor Rooney, moved the HRA estimates for 2006/2007 as detailed in the Director's report (shown as Appendix 3 to these minutes) subject to any amendments contained within the following motion:-
- 8138 There have been significant improvements made over recent years to ensure that the rent payers in West Dunbartonshire receive a quality service at an affordable price.
- 8139 During 2003/2004, the Council was 15th lowest in the league table for average weekly rents. In 2005/2006, we were 12th lowest. We will continue to keep our rent levels low.
- 8140 This Labour Administration has continued to invest in our housing stock. We have reduced management and administration costs and reinvested this into our repairs budget. The repairs budget is now £9.6m for 2006/2007, an increase of £812,190.
- 8141 Our pending file is now an average of £4,000, which is a significant improvement when compared to the previous Administration.
- 8142 The surplus at 31 March 2006 is estimated at £2,620,000. We are required to maintain a Prudential Reserve of £620,000 and this leaves a surplus of £2m. We have considered very carefully our obligation to compensate employees for their Equal Pay Claim and agree to transfer £1.25m to the General Fund to contribute to the overall cost to the Council. This leaves a balance of £750,000.
- 8143 It should be noted that the HRA has gained over recent years with debt rescheduling and reduced insurance costs.
- 8144 This Labour Administration will always listen to our tenants. The message from the recent Rent Setting meetings held on 19 January and 1 February is clear.
- 8145 They want improved services and we have agreed to a meeting in March to explore the options. They also want a proportion of the surplus to be used to keep down rent levels.
We therefore propose:-

1. a weekly rent increase of £0.99 on a 52 week basis, equating to an increase of 2.25% utilising £546,000 of the HRA Reserve;
2. to maintain the existing level of lock-up rentals;
3. to endorse the transfer of £1.25m from the HRA Reserve to help fund the Council's Equal Pay settlement; and
4. to retain the HRA Prudential Reserve of £824,000, which is greater than the level recommended by Audit Scotland.

ADJOURNMENT

- 8146 Having heard Councillor McLaughlin indicate that he wished to circulate a paper containing alternative proposals in respect of the Housing Revenue Account, the Council agreed to adjourn for a short period of time to allow Members sufficient time to read the proposals. At this point, copies of the paper (shown as Appendix 4 to these minutes) were circulated to all those present.
- 8147 The meeting reconvened at 5.50 p.m. with all those Members shown on the sederunt in attendance.
- 8148 As an amendment, Councillor McLaughlin, seconded by Councillor McGregor, moved:-
- 8149 That the Council approves the proposed HRA Estimates for 2006/2007 (as shown in Appendix 4 to these minutes), which includes the re-introduction of the static caretaking scheme at a cost of £250,000. This proposal not only demonstrates that the Council listens to its tenants but will save the Council money in the long term.
- 8150 These proposals will equate to a rent increase of 63p per week (an increase of 1.4% per annum).
- 8151 It was noted that the figure of '£26,000' under the heading 'Income – Lock Up Rents' should have read '£260,000'. At this point, the Director of Housing and Technical Services and the Manager of Finance (Housing and Technical Services) were heard in answer to Members' questions.
- 8152 On a vote being taken, 4 Members voted for the amendment and 16 for the motion, which was accordingly declared carried.

The meeting closed at 6.40 p.m.