

Budget Jury 2008

What happened?

The programme for the Budget Jury was as follows:

Date	Activity	Purpose
18 June 2008 6.30-8pm	Jury Meeting 1	<p>'Setting the scene'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of information about what services the Council provides • How much money it spends • What the budget setting process entails etc. • Opportunity for participants to ask anything they like – <i>Assistant Chief Executive and Head of Financial Services on hand to answer questions</i>
7 July 2008 6.30-8pm	Jury Meeting 2	<p>'What matters to you?'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Chief Executive provides brief overview of current priorities • Participants discuss priorities and list what matters to them – anything goes • Participants select their top five from this list (each person has five post-it note votes) • Re-convene. Participants list the things they consider important (i.e the key deliverables) under each of these five selected priorities (anything goes) • Participants select their top three from these key deliverables (each person has three post-it note votes). <p>This information was taken to Cabinet/ CMT Away Day on 11th July to feed into discussions in setting new priorities.</p>
23 October 2008 6.30-8pm	Jury Meeting 3	<p>'Budget Bids part 1'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants go through list of budget bids drawn up by Heads of Service between August and October 2008. These bids link to new priorities. Each bid to be fully explained by Assistant Chief Executive.
6 November 2008 6.30-8pm	Jury Meeting 4	<p>'Budget Bids part 2'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants vote on the budget bids explained to them at the previous Jury meeting. Participants have 30 post-it votes to allocate collectively: 10 'High' 10 'Medium' and 10 'Low'. <p>Information from this meeting will be shared with Members in the Head of Financial Services' Medium</p>

		Term Financial Plan report ahead of Full Council in January 2009 to aid Members in their decision making.
14 January 2009	Full Council	Participants attend Full Council to observe budget setting and bid-approval by Members (no incentive provided for attendance – this is optional). Participants who wish to may attend a ‘lessons learned’ meeting with Chief Executive, Leader of Council, Leader of Opposition and Portfolio Holder ahead of the Full Council, and have opportunity to talk to the local press about their experience of the Budget Jury after it (participants have been notified in advance of this and are not compelled to attend or talk to the press unless they wish to).

The story so far

Initial feedback from the Budget Jury about their experience has been extremely positive and has done much to improve these ten participants’ perception of the Council. The budget setting process has been successfully demystified for those involved, and a greater understanding of the financial constraints and pressures facing Members and officers has been achieved in spades.

Participants said they welcomed the Council’s openness in sharing financial information with them, and were able to see how budget bids must demonstrate good links to council priorities, have a strong impact on communities and represent good value for money. They were more inclined to view the Council as being ‘on their side’ and were surprised how much better the Council seemed to be in reality compared with its representation in the local media. The meetings were full of lively discussion and debate, cooperation and good humour as the participants’ understanding of Council workings increased.

Participants particularly remarked on the Head of Financial Service’s demonstration of how Council Tax increases of varying theoretical sizes impact on what the Council can achieve, and said they would pay more Council Tax if it meant the Council could achieve the things that mattered to communities. Participants suggested that more detailed financial information such as this should be made available to the residents of the district more widely (i.e. as opposed to headline figures), so that more people had the opportunity to see what income a range of possible Council Tax increases could achieve. The forthcoming online budget consultation has been made more interactive this year as a result of these comments: web users will be able to alter Council Tax levels and prioritise budget bids to try and balance the budget themselves – effectively putting them in the shoes of the Members who represent them.

Appendix Gii details the priority ranking of the budget jury in relation to the funding bids requested by officers. The majority of the high bids are ranked the same as the officers which demonstrates that the priorities set by the Council reflect budget jury views.

One final outcome of the Budget Jury has been the indication from at least five members of the Jury that they would like to become more involved in local democracy and would welcome opportunities for further community engagement. One even

indicated he would be considering standing for election as a District Council in the future as a result of his experience.

A 'lessons learned' meeting is now planned with senior officers and members to identify how the Budget Jury might be expanded in 2009.