

Minutes of a Meeting of: Business Panel information meeting on the 2014-15 budget

held on: 10th February 2014 – 5.30pm

Present: Cllr. Alan Law, Executive Portfolio Member for Finance and Economic Development
Rob Chicken, Federation of Small Businesses
Stephen McKinnon, Owner, Abstract Precision Bodyworks
Richard Deal, Partner, Deal Varney
Sid Shepherd. Prospective new restaurant owner
Steve Painter, Painter PR
David Grant, Director, Reassance/Faraday Property Development
Jeremy Cottam, Chair, Thatcham Chamber of Commerce
Colin Hislop, Business Owner, Thatcham
Mary Hopkins, General Manager, Newbury Showground
Andy Walker, Head of Finance
Bill Blackett, Revenues & Benefits Manager
Janet Duffield, Economic Development Officer
Apologies from Cllr Gordon Lundie, Leader West Berkshire Council

Action

1. **PROPOSED BUDGET 2014-15**

Cllr Law gave an outline of the meeting including the processes followed to arrive at the budget. Amendments had been made to the proposals following feedback from the Consultation that was held in November/December 2013. Cllr. Gordon Lundie's "talking head" video was played to the meeting.

2. Cllr. Law introduced the budget for 2014-15 and circulated a high level summary document that outlined the key points:

- 0% council tax rise from WBC
- A reduced government grant
- Funding for Parish and Town Councils
- Focus on key priorities:-

Maintaining roads and transport infrastructure

Investing in Superfast Broadband

Improving education through capital investment in schools

Protecting vulnerable people

Protecting the environment

Spending within our means

The document also showed some headline figures.

There then followed some comments and questions from the group:

RC noted that he was very pleased at the rollout of Superfast Broadband.

JC was concerned that cuts to public conveniences could have a detrimental effect on the vibrancy of Thatcham town centre and asked if the decision made on handing them to Thatcham Town Council could be kept under review.

SMcK- asked about the process and percentages for business rate retention and Cllr. Law gave an explanation of this.

MH-asked about proposed investment into education as Newbury Showground run an education programme themselves and wondered if any funding could be accessed. However, the investment referred to in Cllr. Law's opening remarks is for capital expenditure only.

JD suggested that MH send some info. To run a search for external funding sources

JC mentioned the Government's "Digital High Street" programme.

JC to send info. To JD on this scheme

SMcK asked about the planning consent for a logistics company at Greenham Business Park and whether any road improvements would be made to accommodate additional traffic that would be generated

JD to check provisions of S106 and advise SMcK

CH asked a question about waste and the £578k saving next year. Cllr. Law explained that a 25 year PFI contract was signed in 2008 and a number of efficiency saving proposals were being discussed with the supplier to deliver this sum next year.

2) NNDR (Business Rates)

BB gave an overview of 5 new changes that were announced in the Autumn Statement:

- a) The change in rate in the £ has been capped at 2% from April 2014 for all ratepayers.
- b) The annual bill will be able to be paid in 12 monthly instalments rather than the current 10
- c) Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR)-the baseline scheme has been extended to 100% rate relief for 2014/15. Currently the scheme is limited to owners of one property of a certain size/RV but from 1 April 2014, SBRR will also be applied to any second property (based on size/RV) for 12 months to encourage business expansion

- d) Retail Relief is being introduced for certain services and retail with an RV of less than £50k. The relief element will be calculated after any other relief applied, up to a maximum relief of £1000. At the moment this is for 2014/15 and 2015/16. A letter will be sent from WBC to around 900 businesses that may benefit from this and further analysis is being undertaken to see if further businesses may qualify.
- e) Empty Retail Premises-if the property has been empty for over a year and is subsequently let, a 50% rates discount will apply for a year. This is a commitment made by Government but no legislation is yet in place for this.

RD asked if discretionary reliefs would continue and BB said that this will be confirmed at the Council Executive meeting on 13/2/14. RD said that discretionary relief has been well-received and would urge that it is continued.

RC asked about re-evaluation and BB said that this will now take place in 2017.

DG asked about Broadband fibre and business rates and BB directed him to the Valuation Office website for this information.

RC commented that very small businesses feel they are being penalised when they are just over the threshold.

The meeting closed at 7pm