

Budget- effective challenge

Brighton and Hove City Council Leader Phélim Mac Cafferty

Context

- B&H is a contested political authority: each political party trying to demonstrate vision and values through the budget process
- I am now leader of council so position has changed!
- Amendments: I am a convert!
- B&H is a committee system: but even in a cabinet system, a budget is a key way for you to demonstrate political aims, and to highlight important community issues

Case study: Green Councillors in opposition

- 6 amendments allowed only
 - Published 'vision document' showing intention of amendments, and sought press interest. Mostly looked at fees and charges/borrowing/reserves
 - Can you identify some key ideas and 'quick wins,' –as you won't get to scrutinise the whole budget. Both in terms of investment and in terms of reversing some cuts, some key ways you can demonstrate your vision would be good to identify
 - - e.g in 2020/21 Greens:
 - > Pressure to continue to support domestic violence services (successfully reversed cut and added investment)
 - > Pressure on council to use budget to show commitment to climate emergency pledge (taken by all councillors) – succeeded in creating climate emergency fund
 - > Housing and homelessness: found funding to demonstrate our commitment to tackling the housing crisis and so could assert this publicly
- >Reversed cuts to learning disability services and to city's communities and equalities groups: received external support for this

Challenges: raising income

- **Context of councils similar:**
reductions in government grant; rising costs of adult social care; expectation that councils raise money through increasing council tax (e.g adult social care precept) and now:
Covid-19: more residents in hardship than ever before / need for public services even greater
- **There is always a challenge of not cutting one service to pay for another – but also the reality of 2020: councils will need to make cuts**
- **Last year we looked at (2020/21 budget)**
- fees and charges – but offsetting to protect those on low incomes from price rises
- **Borrowing: councils can borrow at more favourable rates than private companies; can we make better use of low borrowing rates;**
- **Can we look at reserves: if not now, during pandemic: when? But need to be mindful of e.g fate of Croydon council – so requires financial prudence and sound advice**

Challenge: tackling service reductions

- Some services may not be receiving the funding that aligns with your priorities; how do you want to highlight what your aims are?
- Does your council produce equality impact assessments that shows the impact of cuts? Even if you can't prevent this cut – can you talk about its impact?
- Can you set out ambition/aims/values? We produce a 'vision document,'
- Can you work creatively with partners/e.g community sector, to show what could be achieved if services received more investment: e.g we looked at options for lowering fuel bills (District Heat) in conjunction with local energy companies (BHESCO)

Working with other parties and council officers

- Do you have a named council official or director who can work with you as opposition on developing sound amendments? Or who you can ask for advice? What is your timeline for needing answers?
- Liaising with other groups to make positive changes to the budget can help local communities: e.g asking council to reconsider domestic violence service reductions in B&H was a win-win for the city, was likely an unpalatable cut for the administration anyway, so our way forward was welcomed
- How do you explain what you are doing and why? Do the public/other parties understand the budget; e.g what council tax pays for vs what it doesn't; the difference between ringfenced and revenue budgets?
- Will an amendment pass / if not, how do you talk about why this happened?

Takeaways

- Think about amendments that will demonstrate your priorities and vision
- Work with your finance leads/ party budget groups / named officers in the council
- Make sure you understand the timeline for making changes and getting amendments approved!
- Think about press and how you articulate what you are doing
- Consider if amendments will pass or not: plan for the future