

Budget 2011-12

Council democratic services changes

The Council's political administration propose:

- To create two area planning committees of eight members each, with a final call-in, if signed by eight members, to a "Planning Appeals Committee"; the chair of the former two to have an SRA of 0.5 basic allowance (no SRA for chair of planning appeals committee)
- To make regular area committee arrangements quarterly, renaming these committees "area forums", and withdraw SRAs from chairs;
- To remove area committee revenue budgets;
- To assign each member a budget of £1,500 per annum to be spent in conjunction with the area's community development worker, and note that this can be pooled between members, and also used to convene Neighbourhood meetings in smaller areas. Other ward members should be kept informed about Neighbourhood meetings, and appropriate rules would be drawn up to cover appropriate use of councillors' budgets;
- To retain the Standards Committee until the government announces its plans to reform the local standards regime;
- Introduce single-member decision-making and minimise the number of programmed CEB meetings.
- To task the newly re-structured and strengthened Community Development team to work with local Councillors to enhance ward level involvement from the public and residents groups.

Subject to the outcome of consultation, these measures will be the subject of constitutional amendments to be discussed at the Budget Council meetings, to align the constitution with budget decisions.

We The administration believe these arrangements will improve democracy, decision-making and involvement in Oxford City Council.

Specifically, the structures of area involvement can be more flexible, and we will encourage councillors, where they consider it appropriate, to pull together community meetings in areas smaller than those of current area committees. There remains an area-based element to planning, while at the same time freeing committee structures from lengthy discussion of development control decisions to the detriment of other issues, and reducing the risk of costly planning appeals.

In spite of the acute budget pressures the council faces, we want to give individual councillors the ability to support smaller groups, projects and events, and this is achieved through the new "member budgets". In particular, we hope that councillors will use the new arrangements to bring more residents from their areas together, through informal meetings across smaller areas. The new arrangements for Executive Decisions will be more flexible than at present.

We believe it is right that, at a time when council funding is being cut so dramatically, we look to achieve some reductions in the cost of council committees and unfortunately there is a need to reduce the amount of money spent on small projects (not least so we can protect funding for voluntary groups through the grants process). These arrangements still represent an improvement on the current situation, and will enable councillors to provide stronger community leadership and be more responsive to the needs of their areas.