

City of Edinburgh Council budget meeting

☒ So far everything has been pretty quiet at the Council Chambers this morning.

This morning's meeting has been a much anticipated affair. Even at 9am crowds of protesters, trades union and other campaigners had assembled to make their presence known and offer themselves up for interview.

Most had the same view. The cuts should not affect them, and should not affect them so much.

In the chamber all ceremony was being observed, with the chaplain for the morning's meeting being given the run through of what would happen ahead of time.

The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, John Christie, led the council in prayers. He mentioned that there is a section on the council website headed up consultations, complaints and compliments, and urged the council (to some guffaws from the public gallery) to enjoy the compliments when they come. He concluded the prayers by offering the Celtic Blessing – May the road rise up to meet you... Wise words indeed.

In view of the range and extent of council business which was expected today, the Lord Provost, George Grubb offered up the definition of the word 'question' :- a concise sentence followed by a question mark. As the day wore on there were of course some councillors who forgot that definition.

There were to be twelve deputations :-

BLINDCRAFT :Moir Park Sheltered Housing Tenants' Association
and UNISON City of Edinburgh Branch

COUNCIL BUDGET: Edinburgh TUC and UNISON City of Edinburgh Branch

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES BUDGET : Parent Councils of St Thomas of Aquins Drummond Gracemount Holyrood James Gillespies and Boroughmuir Schools. Royal High Schooll Parent Council and UNISON School Bursars and Secondary Business Managers

FUNDING TO THIRD PARTIES/TRANSITION FROM FAIRER SCOTLAND FUNDING: Crewe Excluded Residents North Edinburgh News, North Edinburgh News Media and Communication Trust, Craigmillar Chronicle, CAB and Click Project.

Blindcraft is an emotive issue, due to two factors:- the factory has always been there and the disabled employees are some of the people who need most help in our society.

✘ OAP, Phyllis Heriot, spoke on behalf of Moira Park Sheltered Housing Tenants' Association. She commented that this was a sad occasion that she should be back here at the council today offering support to Blindcraft. She explained that the workers employed at Blindcraft simply want to work, they have been working for years and are very loyal.

She went on to say:-"I was involved in Blindcraft years ago. We travelled the length and breadth of Britain to find contracts for Blindcraft. We went to Russia where they have such businesses helping their disabled people there. Please do not close Blindcraft down! Do they have to sit at home feeling depressed and sorry for themselves. We have to support them in some way. For God's sake will you please support them? Places like Blindcraft have to be left alone to be a beacon in this time of economic problems."

The unions referred to the council meeting in November when they were in attendance and it was decided that some discussion would ensue on the possibility of a three day week. "It is not that the staff do not want to work. It is because the effect of a 40% cut to their salaries and a consequent cut to their benefits is simply untenable. There is a lack of

confidence in the council to deliver for Blindcraft.”

“The staff are very serious in their belief that this situation will continue for ever. We have seen no help from the council in communicating to the union and staff about ways to go forward.

Jim Mather met with us and carried out a mind-mapping exercise but this was never followed up. The £700m saving is too much too soon. It needs to be staged.”

One of the shop stewards, Dave Anderson, said that he has been involved in this for 2 years and nothing new has come out of it. He claimed that the redeployment opportunities for the employees are zero.

Steve Riley as a shop steward and Blindcraft employee made an impassioned plea:-“I was here in November and I do not court this publicity. I was a plasterer and groundsman before my disabilities set in and prevented me from continuing in those roles. Being in employment is important to the disabled people I know. I would have struggled to raise my family on benefits alone. If Blindcraft closes the effect would be devastating to me and the rest of the workers. We already have barriers to our daily lives to overcome. It could be the Jewel in the Crown for the City of Edinburgh Council. We need a long-term vision for Blindcraft and we need to explore all other possibilities. This is a 200 year old institution and the city council should show Scotland what they can do.”

Councillor Aitken posed the first question to the deputation:-“I want to know if any of you have had any discussions with elected members and if you are aware of any offers to purchase Blindcraft?” The deputation answered this quickly and concisely in the negative.

☒ Councillor Tymkewycz asked:-“Was the vote on the three day week close? Do members have the right to vote even if they are not members of a union?”

Councillor Cardownie posed the following – Would you agree that the late information was simply due to the management of Blindcraft trying to protect pensions? And he went on to claim that the union had not sought any meetings with the administration since November; something which the union claimed was not the case and countered him with the claim that they had been trying since November to get all information on the feasibility of the three day week.

Councillor Hinds asked if any other options for the future of Blindcraft had been examined?

Councillor Wheeler was at pains not really to ask a question but to point out that the council's door is always open to the unions.

The next deputation on the Children and Families Budget, and the resultant questioning, ran way over into extra time until 12.00 when a thirty minute break was declared.

Our photographs will be on Flickr later.