

Budget Council – 22 February 2018

Leader's Speech

“Before I begin, I would just like to clarify that the recommendations for Housing Revenue Account Budget 2018/21 are the revised version in front of you, which were agreed at the Executive meeting before this Council meeting.

This budget before the Council tonight is a realistic budget that addresses our challenges, one that invests in our residents while making us fit for the future.

It has become somewhat of a cliché to stand here and say that we are putting forward this budget in a difficult time for local government.

Nevertheless, I can't stress enough that the situation for this council has never been tougher.

Since 2011, we have managed to reduce the Council's spending by £45million.

This means that the Council Tax payers of Wokingham Borough account for 90% of this authority's revenue income.

For context, residents living in neighbouring Reading cover 71% of their Council's revenue budget.

By 2019/2020, we will NOT receive any Revenue Support Grant, and the Government will 'tax' us

£7.1 million from our retained Business Rates.

In short, in 2019/2020, whereas Reading will have over £192 in grants and retained Business Rates for every resident living in their Borough, Wokingham will receive just over £40 – around one fifth of what Reading will receive.

Our resident's needs are no less than Reading's.

This Borough faces an aging population and an increasing number of children coming into care that we need to look after. This costs this council significant sums of money.

I raised these issues with the Secretary of State at the end of last year, and discussed them here at the Council with the Prime Minister, just a fortnight ago.

I'm pleased to say that we have been invited to discuss further with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (or Ho-Co-Lo-Go as I understand the Secretary of State now calls it) our ideas on how to make the Revenue Support

Grant allocation system fairer, and how to enable us to become the model for self-sufficient councils across the country.

I've set out the challenges that we face – we do not shrink from them.

We believe that the best way to take our Borough forward is to invest in our future.

Already, we've managed to bring our spending down whilst protecting our services.

Other councils have ripped up their services in a desperate bid to get their finances under control.

We have not done that – and we will NOT do that.

In setting our budget this year, we have responded to the priorities that residents have raised through consultation.

Let me give you a flavour of the capital investments we are making.

- Residents said that they wanted to see well-maintained roads – we're investing £158million on roads and traffic congestion, including six new relief roads;
- Residents said they wanted to protect educational attainment and school building improvements across the Borough – we're investing £49.3million on education, delivering new schools, and new school places in Arborfield, Spencer's Wood and Matthews Green
- Residents said they wanted a thriving economy with a successful range of businesses – we're investing £170million regenerating towns and villages, and supporting the growth of our local economy, including affordable housing and new leisure facilities in Bulmershe, Arborfield and Ryeish Green.

We're also investing:

- £100million on commercial assets to create future funding for our services;
- And £52.7million on building strong sustainable communities, including cycleways, greenways and byways, social housing, park and ride schemes and increased recycling, including food waste.

We're investing a grand total of half a billion pounds over the next three years on the things that matter to local people.

We could have embarked on a programme of slash and burn, ripping out the heart of our services in a bid to achieve a balanced budget.

Or we could have ramped up every charge we have in a bid to scrape every penny out of residents' pockets.

Instead, we have been efficient, forward thinking and we continue to reduce waste.

We've overhauled our working processes and embraced new technology.

And we've been innovative and enterprising, looking at the best way to fund our services without placing the liability on the shoulders of our lowest-paid taxpayers.

We have had to make a modest increase to Council Tax, including the Adult Social Care precept, to ensure that our high-quality services are maintained, and our most vulnerable are looked after.

But, it's worth noting that more than half of residents who responded to our budget consultation agreed that they would support a modest increase in Council Tax to protect vital services.

There has been much talk about our investment programme, with wild claims that we are gambling with taxpayers' money.

We are borrowing – but it is a sensible and prudent investment strategy.

We are creating an income for the future that will fund our services, rather than simply sitting back and waiting for someone else to foot the bill.

As time goes on, this will mean that we can increase the investment in our services, without growing the burden on our Council Tax payers.

We know that the Opposition have been heavily critical of our investment portfolio.

But where are their solutions to addressing a 131% increase in adults aged over 85 by the year 2035?

Perhaps they will break with tradition and provide a detailed and fully-costed alternative budget tonight.

Ahead of the Leader of the Opposition's contribution, let me tee up some questions that he will hopefully be able to answer.

They won't support our way of doing things.

But what would they do?

Which fees would they raise?

Would they be willing to go to residents with a Council Tax rise above the cap?

Or would they just slash services to create a balanced budget?

One thing we do know is some of their policies.

They did us the great favour of putting forward a manifesto to take them into the elections in May.

- They say they would build roads and infrastructure before houses – we're already doing that.
- They say they would review parking charges across the Borough and develop a parking strategy – we're already doing that.
- They say they would put pressure on the government to increase funding for schools – we're already doing that.
- They say they would lobby for a fairer national method for deciding housing numbers – we're already doing that.

- And they say they would keep weekly waste collection – we’re already doing that.

Indeed, this last one, weekly bin collection, according to their leaflet, this apparently has come about because of “Lib Dem pressure”.

This is particularly funny, because we announced that we were keeping weekly bin collection on 22nd March 2017 and the Lib Dem manifesto first appeared 8 months later.

Well, they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

With so much in common with what we are already doing, with a phrase which we seem to hear a lot of in Labour these days, I say to the Liberal Democrats – “Why don’t you just join the Conservatives?”

And with a Lib Dem offer that has been simply copied and pasted from ours, I will go further and say to our residents – “Why don’t you just vote for the Conservatives?”

In every time of difficulty, there is opportunity.

Our financial challenges present us with the chance to fundamentally change not just how we deliver our services, but how our community together shapes our local area.

Going forward, we will build a ‘whole community’ approach that brings on board residents, public sector partners, businesses and the voluntary sector.

Together, we will set out in partnership how we provide the services our residents need, how we support our most vulnerable, and how we advance equality of opportunity.

We deliver the Conservative vision.

That is about low tax, as well as high quality and efficient services.

We do this by being an enterprising and productive council that works in collaboration with our community, for our community.

What our Borough needs is a Council that sensibly manages the finances.

A Council that is ambitious.

A Council that faces up to every trial.

We have been a successful council, one that has become efficient, without sacrificing services – one that has always looked for opportunities to deliver the best for our residents.

With this Budget tonight, this administration is showing that we are on the side of our residents, delivering on the things that matter to them, being innovative and forward thinking, and fighting for our Borough against every single challenge coming our way.”