

Budget Statement by Lindsay Ferris – Leader of the Opposition

I would like to echo the welcome to Sarah Kerr. I would also like to say a thank you to Helen Power and wish her well.

This year will, I trust, be the last time the Opposition is not directly involved in producing or scrutinising the budget. It is nigh on impossible to produce an alternative in the limited time currently given. However this year, at the end of my speech we will be submitting an amendment to this Budget.

I have been asked recently how we would run the Council differently if we were given that chance. After a short period of reflection I said ‘we would run the Council for the benefit of our residents, not for the benefit of the Council or developers’.

In our view this Council has increasingly become a ‘we know best and dismissive’ organisation with many residents, whether petitioners or anyone who dares to question their actions being brushed aside and ignored or given near meaningless answers. Such arrogance.

This year, and probably this year only, we benefit to the tune of circa £10m because the threat of Negative Rate Support Grant has been temporarily removed, we are also involved in a Berkshire-wide Business Rates pilot plus we have an increased income from the New Homes Bonus. Without this injection of income we fear WBC could have been heading in the same direction as Northamptonshire and nobody wants this.

However this windfall gives the council opportunity to support some additional projects which otherwise would not have been possible.

There are three major issues that need to be addressed now because if they are not they will have severe consequences for the future of this Borough. They are:

- The number of properties Wokingham Borough is expected to build over the next 20 years or so;
- The second is the rapidly rising level of debt this Council is racking up;
- The third is the level of services that WBC will be able to provide in the future.

Housing Numbers

In the case of housing numbers we, on this side, feel the numbers are far too high and do not believe the Council has fought hard enough to keep this level down.

The way the Council treated both the Barkham and Shinfield debates seeking to limit housing numbers gives us no confidence that the ruling Conservative Group will do anything about it.

The Lib Dem Group have, therefore, decided to take up this challenge.

We have, as of this month, launched a petition on the Government Website objecting to the large number of properties being pushed onto the Wokingham Borough:

'Keep housing numbers under control in already heavily developed areas'

Link to the petition <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/237564>

Whilst we understand the need for homes, the ones currently being built by developers are not of the right type. The Council should be leading here, not just responding to developer demands. We need more 1, 2 and 3 bedroom homes for our local people, truly affordable homes – not more 4, 5 and 6 bed detached houses, and we need bungalows for our older community.

We have made this one of the main themes of our updated Manifesto for 2019 called 'Homes for Local People' to highlight the importance of getting the balance right.

Debt Levels

Regarding the rapidly rising level of debt being incurred, not only does the cost of borrowing increase as the Council borrows more, the interest paid reduces the ability of the Council to provide services for our residents. Instead of providing services, the Council would be paying off debt, this is not the way to run a Council.

Without a significant adjustment downwards we believe this debt will become unsustainable, with all the consequences this could have. Remember it is the Council Tax payer who is the last resort for the Council.

Services

Regarding services, we believe this is the main reason a Council exists. Once they stop providing these services one has to question what is the purpose of a Council?

If at any point the costs of any new infrastructure plus the costs of borrowing outstrips the Council income, then our services will be decimated.

We, as residents, would end up paying ever increasing levels of Council Tax for an ever decreasing level of service. This is what creates a perfect storm.

Over the last two Budgets I have raised considerable concerns about the increasing levels of debt on this Council. The Council has continued to increase its borrowing, increasing the amount of interest rates repayable. Two years ago the Council could borrow at rates below 2%, now the average is over 3.3% and rising. At some point this level of interest will have severe ramifications for the Council and its ability to provide services. Borrowing has grown from circa £50m only a few years ago to a forecast of £538m for 2021/22.

To help cut the level of debt we will instigate an immediate moratorium on the Council's commercial borrowing and reduce the level of this fund from £100m to £25m with immediate effect. We would also review the procedures adopted. Standards of performance at WBC have dropped particularly over the past couple of years. The Council has produced business cases (that is when they did them) with only half the required information and consultations have become a farce. I am sure many of you will remember the school crossing patrol consultation when 97% of

those who responded objected to losing their School Crossing Patrollers, only to be ignored because they did not use the correct word – ‘safety’ What arrogance!!

I will now make our first Revenue Budget proposal tonight – we will reintroduce the School Crossing Patrollers at the sites where residents, parents and schools clearly indicate they wish this to happen.

The Council has even ignored the Local Ombudsman and recently lost a High Court and Court of Appeal hearing where the words ‘abuse of process’ by the Council was used by the senior judges involved. So it is not only local people it ignores.

Wokingham Regeneration

The regeneration project is managed as a stand-alone project. Any additional costs are ploughed back into the project making it ever more costly. We understand this project has some allowances for this increase in costs as they used a 3.5% interest rate to provide this safety net flexibility. However, as just mentioned, the Council is now borrowing at 3.3% (and rising) so that safety net is rapidly disappearing. The uncertainty in the High Street could have serious financial implications for the Council and I feel little or no account is being taken of this position. The way the local businesses in Market Place and surrounding areas were treated during the lengthy delay in the works, many of whom lost thousands of pounds of business during this period with little recompense, is a disgrace.

Support for Local Businesses

To help these businesses and others across the Borough we propose to introduce 2 hours Free Parking in our town centres on Saturdays.

The introduction of Free 2 hours parking would have to wait until new ticket machines are available. This could be up and running later this year. The Government has launched a ‘Future High Street Challenge Fund’ of £675m, available for all Councils to apply for with a deadline of 22nd March. Included in the Challenge Fund are options to include innovative parking strategies to help the High Street. We on this side press the Council to apply to this fund and to include proposals for assistance with parking schemes. We are willing to assist.

The Challenge Fund could possibly cover any projected loss in parking income. We have however included an assessment of the cost of our proposal should WBC choose not to apply to this fund, or do so unsuccessfully.

Failure to help our High Street would mean a number of businesses may not be with us next year. This would not only impact on our towns as a whole but could lead to reduced business rate revenues for the Council. It is in everyone’s interest to reduce car parking charges. Such a change, we believe, would help our struggling High Streets and attract more visitors to our towns.

Leisure

We would also offer Free Parking at Dinton Pastures and California Country Park on Bank Holidays, (only), and after 6pm.

Local residents should be able to enjoy their local parks without the threat of parking tickets. Remember, they do actually own the sites. The parks department would be provided with any additional resources needed to support their services should this policy generate a reduced income.

Highways

The Council has received a grant of over £1.1m for Highways. This we welcome as it will enable the Council to repair a number of roads that were not in the original list for 2019/20.

We propose that £300k be added to this figure to enable additional roads and also footpaths and pavements to be repaired. Many footpaths have seen little or no maintenance for many a year. Some are in extremely poor condition and are now dangerous.

Staffing Issues

The 21st Century restructure has been running over the past 3 years. In our view it has been naive and has not achieved what was intended. Throughout this restructure the Council has employed a large number of interim and temporary staff which has all but destroyed staff morale. This combined with what could be considered as a bullying culture has had a significant impact on the performance of the Council. Our staff are our most important resource, the culture of this Council has to **change** to become more supportive of them. If the current ruling Group is unable or unwilling to change it, then we will.

We have two proposals:

- 1. A reduction in the budget for interim/temporary staff by £500k for 2019/20. We believe the existing staff should be supported wherever possible to cover some of the vacancies, rather than recruit expensive interim staff, it is simply not good business. Only those posts considered essential would be allowed to be temporarily filled;**
- 2. At last, it has been realised that neither Children's Services nor Adult Social Care are suitable areas for the 21C programme. 'We therefore propose to suspend the 21C Programme for these two areas'.**

Children's Services

Children's Services, in particular, requires rebuilding and a period of stability. To assist in this rebuilding we propose to increase the revenue budget in this area by a further £300k this year. We would allocate £230k of this for Children and Adolescents Mental Health Scheme (CAMHS) and a further £70k for Special Educational Needs (SEN) inclusion. We believe the extra provision for CAMHS would in only a short time save the Council considerably more than this extra investment.

We must also improve relationships with our schools.

Adult Social Services

Adult Social Services is experiencing increasing level of demand. It has consistently had an overspend, some of which has been difficult to understand. Before any decision is made regarding our future relationship with Optalis we need a root and branch reassessment as to how the budgets for this area have been used, and where any efficiencies and improvements can be made. It is far too important a service for political dogma to interfere with the safety and wellbeing of our residents,

particularly our older residents. We on this side are willing to work with those involved to achieve the best solutions for our residents.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Some vulnerable residents may not be able to afford even the reduced Council Tax they are expected to pay. **To assist we propose to introduce a Safety Net Fund. For 2019/20 we propose this fund to be £100k.**

Libraries

I have one final area I would like to mention. This is something relating to my own ward of Twyford. For many years the residents have been promised a new library but this has not materialised.

We would provide an initial sum of £400k to enable this project to restart and move towards the provision of a new library and community hub.

I would like to now move the Liberal Democrat amendment to the 2019/20 Council Budget.

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