

Leader's Budget Speech – Council 21st February 2022

Members, we meet to set this Council's budget for the coming financial year at what is hopefully the closing days of the Covid pandemic. Of course, we must still take sensible precautions and remain vigilant for new variants, but the days of legal restrictions will soon be behind us.

Before looking to the future, please bear with me a moment as I just recap on how this Council responded to the pandemic as, I believe we can be justly proud. Within days of the first lockdown being announced on the 23rd March 2020, this Council took measures to protect vital frontline services such as our waste collection service, implemented measures to enable home working, and responded to government's requests, including providing support for those shielding, and getting 'everyone in'. I am sure all Councillors will join me in expressing our heartfelt gratitude to all Council Officers, who went above and beyond to support our New Forest communities. As a small token of our gratitude, we will be holding a thank you event for council staff at Appletree Court, when safe to do so later in the year.

The Council administered an unprecedented level of support to our local businesses, over £123million, through grants and business rates discounts. And were commended on our approach by businesses who appreciated the speed at which payments hit their bank accounts.

And on top of the government's furlough scheme, we have provided over £19million of support to our residents through direct payments and council tax support, helping those most in need.

But now we must look forwards, with new challenges to meet, such as the rising cost of living, particularly energy costs.

While there are doubters on the left, history has shown us that the best way to improve living standards is not through state controlled handouts, but through growing private enterprise, while at the same time ensuring greater access and opportunity for all those within our community.

We will work with partners, from the private, public, charitable and education sectors to both drive economic growth within the District, but also to ensure our residents have the access to the training and skills they need to take advantage of new employment opportunities, to help them improve their and their families lives in a way that is sustainable for the long-term.

The Solent Freeport offers a once in a generation opportunity to do just this on the Waterside and beyond. It will not be a panacea to the economic challenges ahead, no one has claimed it will be, and it will not be without its challenges. Especially around the infrastructure required to make it successful and ensure that it does not cause further congestion or environmental damage. However, with over £1/2billion of public money predicted to be available to tackle these issues, there has not been a better opportunity to revitalise the economy of the Waterside since the refinery in

1920s or the Power Station in 1960s. This is a once in a generation opportunity and this Conservative administration will seize it.

Of course, there are members of the opposition who are sceptical about the benefits the Freeport will bring, and that is fine. I mean, being Liberal Democrats they'll of course claim it was their idea if it's successful, but that's just what they do. It's human nature to fear change, but we live in a changing world and we do our community no favours by being left behind, so I ask what alternatives do these nay-sayers offer? What plan do they offer to provide new, skilled jobs to the residents of the New Forest? What opportunities do they offer for those who might wish to start a new business to supply and support this new Freeport? None.

The experts, not me, the experts that the LibDems exult we should listen to whenever it suits them, estimate that the Solent Freeport will create 26,000 jobs and £2billion GVA directly within the Solent.

But still, we Conservatives want more for our residents across our District. We want more for the residents of Totton and the Waterside, that's why this budget makes provision of over £1million for the regeneration of our town centres and to increase sustainability across the District. To drive local employment and economic growth, not by seeking to supplant the private sector, but to support enterprise by fostering opportunity and providing the skills our residents need to benefit from a growing local economy.

The Council will begin consulting with the Town Council, community groups and residents of Totton this summer, about their vision for the town over the next 20 years. We will work with partners, public and private, to deliver the community's aspirations and revitalise Totton town centre, to ensure that it is a vibrant and sustainable community for this and future generations.

We are only able to invest in our communities, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, because of this Conservative-run Council's sound management of our own finances. We will continue to make prudent decisions, to ensure that we deliver for our residents, but in a way that is financially sustainable.

No Conservative administration wants to increase Council tax and we are no exception, however with UK inflation currently at over 5%, and our own energy costs predicted to increase by over 90%, it would not be prudent to make any other decision. Therefore, this budget, at just under £21million, proposes an increase of five pounds on a band D dwelling, bringing the total share of the Council Tax that this Council will receive to £188.36 per band D property for the coming year, less than three pounds sixty-three per week.

While no-one wants to see their overall Council Tax bill increase, for this year at least, with the £150 government council tax support payment, more than 60% of households with our District will pay less Council Tax in the coming year than last, by about eighty-five pounds.

Our Housing Revenue Account budget includes maintenance budgets of over £10million, and includes a budget to improve fire safety measures of £5½million .

It's also a budget that includes over £14million in the coming year to fund additional housing numbers to improve the possibility of more families coming off our home search register and into their own home. If we do not increase rents, we have to spend less on maintenance, less on safety measures, or less on new housing; I wonder which the opposition leader would prefer?

Members know that our medium-term financial plan shows a deficit of just under £1.9million by 2025. This is a challenge, but through our sensible investments in service efficiency, for example the over £600,000 a year set aside to implement our ICT strategy, increased investment property income, an additional £278,000 this year, and other efficiencies, such as reviewing our corporate estate, in light of new ways of working, I am confident that this gap can be closed.

Our General Fund Capital programme for the coming year totals over £17million. Delivery of vital Capital projects, such as over £3.6million for coastal monitoring and works, £7million to sustain and modernise our waste and recycling service and nearly £5million for our economic sustainability and regeneration projects, and now £½million to increase the Council's sustainability and help deliver on our climate change and nature emergency action plan, is made possible through the reserves we have accumulated and the Council's track record of making revenue contributions to capital financing, when it is able to do so.

Members, while there is much to be optimistic about for the future, many of our residents are worried about rising inflation and the impact this has on household budgets, especially for those already struggling from the financial effect of the pandemic. The average household will see their gas and electricity bills increase by 54% in April. It is therefore even more important that we help our residents reduce their energy consumption, not only to offset some of the energy price increase, but also to reduce carbon emissions. It is not a question of cutting costs or carbon, it is possible to do both. For example, having 270mm of loft insulation can save a householder around £165 a year on their energy bills. Through the implementation of our Climate Change and Nature Emergency Action Plan we will engage with residents and work with partners to provide advice on how they can increase their environmental sustainability and reduce their energy usage and cost.

We will continue to support our most vulnerable residents, for example we have committed to provide £600,000 funding to Citizens Advice New Forest over the next three years and we have awarded over £215,000 in community grants this year, with no plans to reduce the funding available in future years. Our funding combines with the funding and tremendous efforts of others whether through charities, individuals and other organisations that enables us together to support our residents and unique community.

Members, £7million investment in sustaining and modernising our waste and recycling service, including £4million for a new depot. Investment that will help increase our recycling rate, in a sustainable way, and ensure we provide a modern, high quality service into the future.

£10million to improve and maintain our Council housing stock.

£1.7million to meet corporate plan priorities, including regeneration of our town centres, starting with Totton, and increase the Council's and our District sustainability.

A Solent Freeport, delivering 26,000, 8,000 of which will be within the Waterfront cluster. And predicted to deliver £1.6billion of private sector investment, on top of the £½billion public funding.

A General Fund Capital Programme of over £17million and a Housing Revenue Account capital programme of nearly £25million in the coming year.

And if that isn't enough, increasing the grant every for member to support small projects within their community to £1,000, so that members can help their communities celebrate Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee.

All this and over 60% of households paying £85 less Council Tax than last year.