

Chairman, it takes a lot of time, thought and effort to produce a sound balanced budget that seeks to prioritise the funding we have available to the highest priority areas as outlined in the Council's adopted corporate plan.

There are also several hurdles along the way that we have to contend with. In December we found out that the provisional finance settlement for 2025/26 had reduced our expected level of government backed funding by nearly half a million pounds. Then of course the white paper released on December the sixteenth cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of Local Government in England. In January through the final finance settlement, only then did we receive notice that the employer national insurance grant was only going to cover 25% of our forecast increased cost; another shortfall of around half a million pounds.

As a long-standing Conservative administration however, we are well versed in these challenges, and because of our prudent and sensible approach to financial management, we are able to weather these storms, and still produce a balanced budget that continues to invest in the services that we deliver for our residents.

Lets be clear, it is no mean feat to produce a balanced budget that includes an additional two point three million pounds within the revenue budget, and eight million pounds within the capital programme to deliver a new, modern waste service. A new service that will encourage households to produce less waste, and recycle more. This significant level of investment, on top of the eight million pounds spent over the last 14 months on our fantastic new depot facility in Hardley, shoring up our ability to provide a vital front facing service for several years to come.

The recent corporate peer challenge that was undertaken at the Council gave us really helpful feedback that our corporate plan was well prepared with an ambitious vision, and well communicated. It did however also recommend that we reflect on capacity and prioritise clearly. We need to be sensible about what we can realistically achieve and deliver in the space of a financial year and medium-term budget cycle.

I therefore have three main priorities to deliver over the next financial year; Council transformation, the delivery of the new waste service, and the investment in community based assets.

The budget continues to prioritise investment in our Council wide transformation programme, despite it being unlikely that we'll have the time to see through the delivery of all the savings initially targeted

through the original business case. We are very much full steam ahead in terms of still seeking to deliver modern digital platforms that will improve our residents and customers ability to self-serve, and more easily transact with the Council at a time that suits them.

The significant upgrade to our waste collection service, including for the first time the separate collection of food waste is the single largest whole system change that we will have seen at this Council for decades. The budget provides the necessary funding required to roll-out our new waste service, which will be a truly mammoth undertaking over the next twelve months.

I have also reflected on the position that the devolution White paper leaves us with. It would be financially irresponsible of us to not think ahead to how we can best support the new local authority that will continue to serve the New Forest residents. I have therefore set aside some funding to invest in specific and necessary local government reorganisation resource, and have prioritised one point four million pounds of residual funding we have available from our budget equalisation reserve to enable investment in our community assets. The programme will require important discussions with Town and Parish councils to secure local services at a local level.

Of course there are several other matters that continue within our budget plans, aligned to the Corporate Plan; the budget includes the additional forty thousand pounds I pledged last year to increase the amount that this Council can put into the community grants programme. Thanks to the cross-party work of the task and finish group and overview and scrutiny panel, we have awarded grants in the 2025/26 financial year totalling three hundred and twenty three thousand pounds, including an increase to individual councillor grants from six hundred pounds to one thousand pounds. I implore all councillors in this chamber to utilise this funding to maximum effect, and support the initiatives and projects in your respective areas that have the widest reach to your constituents.

The budget also includes in excess of eleven million pounds over the next three years on CIL funded project delivery. Projects will result in improvements to our town centres, coastal destinations, open spaces, community halls, sports halls, footpaths and highways across the district. This is another commitment from the Conservative administration to ensure our new forest community see the direct benefit from developer funded CIL contributions.

Our Housing budget for 2025/26 allows for over thirteen and a half million pounds of maintenance expenditure to our 5,250 properties; an increase of two point eight million in comparison to 2024/25. We are accelerating our maintenance programme over the next few years to the significant benefit of our tenants. These programmes will continue to improve energy efficiency, and further improve the quality of the homes we provide through enhanced kitchen, bathroom, doors, windows and boiler replacement programmes. In addition, we have set aside budget of over forty five million pounds to spend on new homes over the next 3 years. If we could deliver more, then trust me, we would, but we have to be realistic about the availability of local housing supply, and be sensible about the number of opportunities we can take forward within the next 3 years considering the Local Government Reorganisation framework.

I won't shy away from having to make sure our housing rents track inflation, and that our fees and charges remain carefully benchmarked and reflective of increased service delivery costs. This is why I endorse the range of increases as set out within the budget report.

As an administration, we have proposed an increase to the New Forest District Council precept of five pounds and ninety eight pence for the year. A precept amount which often gets lost amongst the overall bill which of course includes the council tax precept from the County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire Rescue service, and the local town and parish council. We can only control our part, and I think to do all that we do for a band D council tax for the year of two hundred and five pounds and seventy seven pence I believe represents excellent value.

The fully-funded and balanced Housing Revenue Account and General Fund Budgets both remain ambitious, but are achievable. They are well thought through and considered, and enable us to prioritise what we can reasonably deliver on areas that will make the biggest impact to the largest number of our residents.

My special thanks go to our wonderful staff at the Council who continue to provide such excellent services, and to my Cabinet colleagues for their work and input into this difficult and challenging budget process.

Chairman, I fully endorse the recommendations as laid out in the report of the Cabinet.