

## Budget Speech Feb 2021

We see before us a comprehensive document detailing the budget proposed for the coming year. I would like to thank Adele, Andrew and their team for providing the full information and officers across the council for their efforts to minimise the drastic cuts we are seeing that affect council operations and services to residents.

In this report it states 'Unlike many other councils, low levels of reserves and the lowest Council Tax in the country outside London, coupled with increasing levels of borrowing, have made the RBWM financial position more challenging'.

We have been continually told by the Conservative administration that... 'if it weren't for Covid' we would be in a much better place ...and what a wonderful success their financial strategy has been in 20/21 with a £3m underspend.

In 20/21 we used our 2.8m contingency so, to me, the 3m underspend is just the contingency brought forward.

Covid did affect both costs and Income figures so we are not able to look at a true comparison to the budget but luckily, Central Government has ensured that any Costs or Income Losses throughout the year have been fully compensated. So now we are agreed Covid has not affected the council's finances this year.

The financial challenge is set out on Page 101 Paragraph 13.2. 'A key risk for the Council is that its finances are not sustainable in the long term and it doesn't have enough reserves to enable it to effectively manage the financial risk it faces in the Medium Term.

Despite the assumption that we will continue to increase Council Tax by the maximum allowed for the next 5 years at least we are still having to implement 23m of cuts by 2025.

23m over 5 years. Even with all these cuts to services and increases in charges residents paying a Band D council tax will pay 12.5% more in 2024

Last year Cllr Hilton highlighted the administration's aim to 'future-proof the borough, allow it to protect the vulnerable while supporting the discretionary services enjoyed by residents.'

You can see from the equality impact statement and from the public questions that the vulnerable will be impacted by these cuts.

And what of those discretionary Services.....

Closing day-centres, while reducing the service budget by half is not supporting services in my book.

The Library service saw a cut to their budget of 265k this year, we are looking at another cut of 121k next year and a consultation is out asking to cut the Libraries budget of another £292k in the future.

These are reductions in hours across the borough and closures of the village & community libraries. That's a total of 638 thousand pounds from an original budget of just over 2m that's a third of the budget gone in 2 years.

Community wardens .... Another service applauded by all councillors and at the heart of our communities.

In March 2018 the Cabinet committed to increasing the wardens to 25, last year the cuts to services reduced the number of wardens to 19 but, according to the Lead Member, 'the core aims of the warden team' was 'remaining unchanged, namely, to build community cohesion and to provide a visible deterrent to crime' we are now seeing another cut to community wardens & community safety of 300k that's 500k reduction in the service. I cannot see how that service is being supported, its being decimated.

In this budget we are seeing cuts proposed to Day Centres, Arts Centres, Community programmes, Libraries, Bin collections, Youth Services, Council Tax Discounts, Community wardens, Flower displays..... and there has been increased charges for Parking Permits, Green Waste and services to schools..... the promised review of 'discounted resident parking' has not seen the light of day and more severe cuts are to follow.... And apparently, this is 'success'.

In 2019 Cllr Hilton stated 'several other councils' compared unfavourably to RBWM and were 'struggling to make ends meet' .... 'proposing cuts to arts funding, road maintenance, libraries, weekly bin collection, while using reserves to support their budget'... ..Sound familiar?...it seems that RBWM has entered that select group

Our reserves are just above the minimum, at an estimated 6.7m at the end of the year, we are told that they are just 'adequate' to cover known risks. Recently the river Thames was approximately 30cms away from reproducing the floods of 2014 but there is no budget for emergency response... it would have to come out of reserves and so take us below the minimum required. That is how tight the financial situation is we are one risk away from sinking.

In 2019 the Lead Member (at the time) stated that the council would be 'debt free, including the pension deficit, in the medium-term future'.... 2024 .... There is zero chance of that happening, our debt in 2024 will hit 250m pounds and the pension deficit is currently over 80m

Last year Cllr Hilton stated that 'The Oaks Leisure Centre remained a borough priority and, in addition, the council was committed to supporting the Lower Thames Scheme that would protect residents' homes from flooding.'

Looking at the Capital cashflow Appendix 4 Annex C – There is only 10m of the promised 50m expenditure detailed for the River Thames Scheme and there is no mention of the Oaks Leisure Centre despite the report going out to 2035.

So.... No Oaks Leisure centre and no River Thames scheme... so much for Conservative commitments to the south of the Borough and the rural villages of Old Windsor, Datchet & Wraysbury.

I asked at Cabinet whether there was a priority list for removal of savings should we have further underspend.... This was not answered so I assume the answer is 'NO'. This is a failure to plan, a failure during the last administration to provide a Corporate Plan that was more than a selection of vote winning proposals. We still have no Corporate Plan for

the future, no priorities, the administration has failed in their obligation to set a direction. That was your one job, to set policy.

But due to there being no priority list..... if there are additional 'one off' funds available this year then I, personally, would ask you to postpone the cuts to community wardens... undertake a full review as to the impact, on the council and its engagement with communities, of reducing the wardens further .....and whether we could merge some of the DECO role to ensure we have the funding so they can continue.

The decisions you need to take are difficult we know that... but the council should not be in this position of reducing services so far that we will be delivering statutory services.. only.... and if Cabinet really want to work collegiately then be transparent..... don't vote for the savings proposals and then mount a public campaign against them (as we have seen in recent weeks) That is duplicitous and misleading for the residents....

The next couple of years are going to be challenging, we were not in a good position at the start of the pandemic and its obvious we do not have the reserves to absorb any negative affect of Covid next year.

There are some large assumptions made to balance the budget, including 1m of covid mitigation from government for Q2. This is not yet guaranteed and may have to be found from the contingency. Will parking income start to return to previous levels?... it may take time, it may not ever recover to the same level.

You were warned about the rising demand on Social Care and Waste, about the officer redundancies and the hollowing out of the core of the council,

that excessive borrowing without a cohesive repayment plan was opening the council up to extensive borrowing costs.....

and you ignored those warnings.

We could expect that if you had heeded those warnings we would not be in this situation..... but we are and you have left us with no options, the council is cut to the bone.

The administration has failed the electorate and it is now down to the officers, the professionals, to put us on a firmer footing

Please don't try and spin this .....you are making cuts to services because you have to, there is no choice, and this budget indicates service cuts will continue for the next 5 years unless we see an increase in funding and a focus on providing a different direction and strategy.

Do I agree with the need to increase council tax by the maximum allowed .... Yes..... given the financial situation we are in... we have no choice.

Do I agree with the savings proposals ....No! ... There are no priorities set. The Conservative administration have been led by opportunists, politicians without any thought as to the consequences of their actions on the Council ... or the residents.

Voting for this budget appears to be comparable to investing in a company without a business plan.

To residents this is a.... ' Pay more for Less services' .... budget.