

Budget Response Speech Feb 2022

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I would like to thank Adele, Andrew and their team for their work in ensuring a balanced budget and officers across the council for their efforts in providing the best services possible despite the volatile financial situation

I have seen, time & time again, the administration and their cheerleaders berate the opposition for not being able to produce an ‘alternative’ budget **so lets not... ‘inadvertently mislead’ ...residents as to the role of the opposition in the budget process.**

We are all aware that we could only propose amendments to the administrations final proposed budget that was approved on the 10th February

The Independent group and the Liberal Democrats actually submitted their views on the draft budget, for consideration, during the consultation. Incidentally, we both highlighted, amongst others, the negative impact the cessation of arts funding would have on those organisations.

We can suggest, we can challenge, and we can hold to account But the responsibility of setting the budget always lies with the Cabinet. If you will not ‘own’ that responsibility then we will. The Borough deserves transparency, truth and to ‘trust’ their local politicians. **Our Borough deserves better.**

The basics of this budget is that there is no option but to raise council tax by the maximum allowed, this year and for the next 4 years. Despite these increases it is still necessary to find another 13 million savings by February 2026.

During the last 2 administrations we have seen a reduction in the services offered by the council

The Children’s Centre offer has been reduced

Libraries have been closed or hours reduced, despite being subsidised by Parish councils.

There is now no Council HQ in Windsor despite the promises by the Conservative administration. York House has been rented out to shore up the budget.

Community Wardens have been reduced from a promised 25 to 6

Where is the social housing promised, year on year, by the administration?

The Assisted Transport scheme reduced by stealth, the system changed in a way that was not compatible with how residents used it.

The promised Oaks leisure centre has been mothballed.

The promised funding for the River Thames Scheme evaporated, without a Plan B.

... And what of our waste collection, a change of contract that ended up costing in excess of £850k more for a reduction in collections and the financial details are still not transparent.... And the amount of officer & member time spent on resolving waste collection issues!!!

Its just waste on waste!

The officer core has been hollowed out with the unseen impact on skillsets, planning, strategy, democracy and evidenced policies and decision making. This became obvious within the originally deficient BLP and the lack of strategic policies in place to drive the direction of the Council. The council leadership team is trying to recruit... to fill those gaps in our skillset. It is being held back by the lack of funding to pay for the best people for those positions.

In February 2013 I highlighted that the selling of Council Assets for development was the only way the administration could ultimately pay for their cuts to council tax. This is exactly what we see happening. Land assets are being sold to pay off the Conservative debts built up by the borrowing to fund high profile, headline grabbing projects. This was no way to run the council finances.

This year's budget was set in place by decisions made up to 5 years ago. Outsourcing..... pushing for cheaper and cheaper contracts without assessing the impact on the quality of service. The loss of knowledge and control through redundancies. Spending on projects (and running up the council's debt) without having guaranteed income that could be realised.

As the opposition, we have suggested options, challenged decisions and held the administration to account..... and have been consistently ignored.

There is a paper coming to Cabinet next week regarding the return of our highway engineers to an in-house service which I support wholeheartedly.

Ironically, in January 2017, I challenged the decision to outsource this specialised and knowledgeable team, I called in the decision to scrutiny challenging response times, lack of control, communication with partners and members. The conservative members ignored my concerns and voted in favour of outsourcing, despite there being no evidence to support this move.

We spoke out against the original BLP submission document. We challenged that it was deficient, there wasn't the evidence to support the assertions made. We were ignored, the inspector agreed with us, it has taken an inordinate amount of officer time to get it to its current state and there is still much more to do regarding the supplementary planning documents to complete it. This has made the whole process unnecessarily costly. **Our Borough deserves better.**

The stranglehold that the administration continues to place on the Overview & Scrutiny process, **despite two consecutive Peer Group reviews calling for change, restricts the only mechanism that enables true challenge to take place.**

So please either welcome challenge and collegiate decision making going forward **or stop pretending to care what we think.**

Given that it's the decisions we make now that set the building blocks for the future, I welcome the Finance Directors insistence that to increase spend in one area will mean a reduction from another.

The accounts for Month 8 (November) indicated that there would be a predicted underspend of 101k for this financial year, the administration obviously has information that I am not aware of as they have allocated £140k as a grant to arts provision, I am fully in support of this in principle, but it is not guaranteed and would depend on costs incurred to the end of the financial year..... However should there be an increase to this year's underspend (above £140k) we would like to propose that we add it to our grants total and use it to support our voluntary community groups that are so essential for providing help and activities to our residents especially coming out of Covid and the isolation that accompanied the pandemic. I would hope we would all be agreement.

I would also ask that the opposition, through scrutiny, be involved in the promised review of the residents parking scheme. I personally believe it is imperative, for Windsor Town Centre, that it be expanded to cover Victoria Car Park should finances allow.

Looking further into the future, all contracts should be reviewed to assess whether we would provide a better service if they were returned 'in-house'. Ensuring the quality of service across our outsourced and 'transformed' departments needs to be our highest priority, continually chasing issues, returning to the same job ... **these are timewasting and costly.**

The Medium Term Financial Strategy is to be refreshed, this needs to be closely aligned with the Corporate Plan and our Medium Term budget. Our aim, as a council, is to deliver the Corporate Plan objectives. There will be a cost to this and the budget must reflect those costs. If it doesn't then we will not be able to afford to deliver those objectives.

The Medium Term Financial Plan is mapped out against a period of uncertainty. The Fair Funding Review, Levelling Up and Adult Social Care funding reform will impact us as a council. While there isn't enough information to include any pressures in this year's budget papers, we are

told at paragraph 5.2.4 that although the 22/23 settlement from central government included nearly £3m additional grant ... this could be 'one-off' and may not be available next year.

It is stated that our general reserves are forecast to be £7.1m, marginally above minimum level. The optimum is nearly twice that level and we are currently not in a position to increase them. This is identified as a key risk.

In Appendix 1 paragraphs 1.3 & 1.6 it highlights our current situation

'With low levels of reserves & one of the lowest levels of Council Tax... coupled with increasing levels of borrowing'it.. 'has made the position more challenging'

'the position... is more acute than other councils due to... low levels of reserves.... Insufficient to cover future projected funding shortfalls.'

When you add this to substantial levels of borrowing (increasing to £238m in 2024/25) and the cost of borrowing (up to £8.6m annually) you can see why this is a key risk to the future financial sustainability of the council. These are truly big numbers.

Our history of delivering savings has not been impressive over the years, and I can see that officers are now closely monitoring the figures over the year.

Again there is no option, we must deliver the savings the officers have identified to ensure a balanced budget.

This budget is very constrained by our financial situation, I am sure every member can identify an area that needs further resource, we need to make that happen... if we can.

The question is... Can I vote for a budget that balances but where the decision making processes have been flawed?

So... my suggestions

Include any further unallocated underspends to the Grants budget

A Cross party review of the resident discount parking scheme (is it fit for purpose, can it be improved)

Build the arts funding into the base budget.

... and commit to ensuring Overview and scrutiny has the resources and the voice to allow it to play an active part in collegiate decision making.

There is now an opportunity for you to listen to the Opposition and collectively work towards making the best decisions for the council and our residents, because **our borough deserves nothing less.**

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