

## Budget Response Speech Feb 2023

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It is a legal requirement to provide a balanced budget and I would like to thank Adele, Andrew and their team for producing the budget for 23/24.

In order to provide a balanced budget, and budget underspend, council tax can be increased, charges (such as parking) can be increased....

Services can be removed or reduced but the policy decisions made by Cabinet during the last 12 years are still negatively impacting today.

What matters is the effect the budget has on the council as an organisation and on services to residents. This budget again looks to make 'savings' of over 10 million pounds off the annual council spend that's another 10% reduction after accounting for increase in demand.

I have given the oppositions response to the budget since 2012. Good, evidenced decision making is achieved through transparency, collaboration and challenge. Without these... the only official representation the opposition can make is via scrutiny panels... and proposed amendments to the Cabinets draft budget.

I cannot remember a time during those 12 years has the Conservative administration publicly acknowledged, or responded within the budget papers, to any recommendation from the scrutiny panels or accepted any proposed amendments. That speaks volumes as to the attitude of consecutive conservative administrations. Unless you take notice and work with scrutiny then it is just a 'tick box' exercise.

I would like to remind you that when challenged in 2019, regarding their plan for reducing borrowing, the Lead Member (at the time) stated that the council would be 'debt free, including the pension deficit, in the medium term future' .... By 2024 .... The cashflow forecast on page 203 details the councils debt to continue until 2034/35 and that's with no new major capital expenditure AT ALL..... and increasing Council Tax by the maximum allowed year on year.

Our estimated borrowing costs for 23/24 are over 9m pounds ... that's 9m pounds that cannot be spent on services. For 24/25 it is estimated to be

over 12m..... on a 108m budget... that's over 11% of our total revenue budget.

The S151 officer states at paragraph 3.8 'Given the levels of savings identified, the council needs to assure itself that there are robust plans and processes to deliver and report on the delivery of savings during 2023/24'

Given the latest estimate of unachievable savings for the current year is 655 thousand pounds I am concerned that we are looking at continual non achievable savings plans.

AT paragraph 5.3 it is stated that 'On this basis it would be unwise to assume that the projected budget gaps could be closed through greater efficiency alone. There is a fine dividing line between further efficiency and a reduction in service.'

I would say that this budget crosses that line and we, as a council, should recognise that fact.

Let's look at some of the conservative administrations promises for the 4 years following the 2019 budget

Fund at least 25 community Wardens – We now have 6

Build the Oaks Leisure Centre – This has never made it into the budget despite Cabinet stating that 'The Oaks Leisure Centre remained a borough priority'

Support the development of the River Thames Scheme – This scheme went ahead without channel 1 due to RBWM not being able to finance the £50m contribution, condemning the villages of Datchet, Horton, Wraysbury and Old Windsor to the risk of future flooding. This was despite Cabinet stating in 2020 budget that they were 'committed to supporting the £640m Lower Thames Scheme that would protect residents homes'.

Then there was... Build hundreds of social rented homes in the 4 years to March 2023 –

in the financial year 19/20 we built zero social rented homes

in 20/21 we built 7 social rented homes

in 21/22 we built .... Zero social rented homes

in 22/23 we built....15 social rented homes

That's a total of 22 social rented homes..... a far cry from the 'hundreds' promised in 2019

We are not doing enough to promote local use of our town centres. I was encouraged to see that my suggestion (in last year's budget response) of extending discount parking to Victoria Street has now been implemented and It is positive to see the promise to review residents discount parking charges.... .... But this was promised in 2020. Delivery on promises does not seem to be a priority. Personally, I would prefer to have a more substantial offer for our residents, so they support our high streets.

Anyone can put forward a plan... its whether you deliver it that counts and this conservative administration's delivery record on their promises has been dire.

Reductions in our experienced officers, to enable cuts to council tax, has meant that service standards have slipped and it is costing residents more for less services.

The decision was taken to outsource services without retaining the officers to monitor the contract and ensure standards of service. This has led to a reduction in the standard of service received by residents.

The decision was taken to enter into contracts without measurable outcomes because of the lack of officers with procurement or contract management skills, these contracts were flawed , with glaring omissions and have cost us thousands

You overestimated the income from Magnet/Braywick development project by over 20m, Cabinet that said Braywick would be fully funded by the sale of the Magnet.

I haven't the time to address every line of budget savings but will mention a couple to emphasise the extent of cuts that have been proposed.

PLA07S – review of parking enforcement cut of 11k

this is the removal of school crossing patrollers at 2 schools. The crossing patrollers are there due to special circumstances, for instance.. the road layout near the school is dangerous for children to cross yet physical crossings cannot be installed. What price do you put on our children's safety.

CHI20S – Family Hub services

Removal of targeted group work from anyone other than those with access to a social worker... again reducing access to help.

CHI21S – Reduction in Family support workers reducing the offer to vulnerable children.... Again reducing access to help

AHH23S – Reduce scale of services to carers

We have seen a reduction in the funding from revenue to the Climate partnership. We are told that this will be replaced by developer funds.... This is concerning as developer funding should be addressing the issues identified from the development. It still appears to be a reduction in funding for one of our Corporate Plan priorities.

There are 229 mention of 'reviews' in this budget but all of these reviews will 'apparently' result in less money being spent, less officers employed or a reduction in service.

There have been changes since the draft budget due to additional funding from Central Government, one of these is £240k for 4 warrant officers. I personally haven't seen the evidence of need or the outcomes agreed, so cannot comment on whether this proposal is value for money....

Apparently only 9 out of the 357 responses to the budget consultation

mentioned police visibility and this was enough for a £240k investment .... In March 2018 Cabinet committed to increasing the wardens to 25, when imposing the reduction to 19 Wardens (in 2020) the Lead member stated 'Assurance should be provided in the core aims of the Warden team remaining unchanged namely to build cohesion and to provide a visible deterrent to crime'..... I wonder if there had been the promised 25 community wardens whether we would be considering this 240k investment.

Surprisingly this change has not seen any scrutiny and members were not allowed to ask questions of Cabinet when the budget was on the agenda. No challenge, no scrutiny, no transparency.

This is on top of earlier reductions in Library hours, Bin Collection, Day Centre services, Arts funding, Community programmes, Youth Services, Community Wardens, no money to replace diseased trees, increased charges for Parking permits, Green Waste, services to schools and reported issues across departments do not get a response.

You were warned about the expected demand on Social Care and Waste, you were warned about the consequences of the extensive officer redundancies and the loss of expertise and knowledge.

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

And you ignored us.

You have let our residents down.

This budget is the legacy of the last 16 years of a conservative administration. 16 years of not respecting challenge, 16 years of non-transparency, 16 years of soundbites and political decision making.

It is policy decisions that shape a budget... I did not support the policies that shaped this budget therefore I cannot support the budget.

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