



concern since, in 2014/15, there was a surplus of £4.726 million in the Adult Social Care budget. This is not good management – how can there be such an underspend, yet less than a year later, a rise in Council Tax is sought for the same area? In principle, we do not oppose a rise in Council Tax purely for Adult Social Care but we see no detail as to the use to which it will be put.

The Elected Mayor and Cabinet also propose to increase Council Tax by a further 1.998% for "general services": again, they are unable to tell us upon what these extra funds will be spent.

It is surprising that, in such consultation events as were held, the possibility of tax rises was not put before residents for their views to be expressed. Neither the rise of 2% for Adult Social Care nor the additional rise for general expenditure was set out for the public to consider.

With regard to the efficiencies proposed, we make the following comments:

1. The reduction of £200,000 in the Environment budget; while the Budget proposals refer to "a reduction in some grounds maintenance", we note Cllr Stirling's assurance that throughout the Borough, town centre cleansing standards will be unchanged and that grass cutting and edging will not be reduced. No doubt residents will be keeping an eye on this. Details of what will change have not been given. There have now been several years of reduced income from central taxation and it is pleasing that the Cabinet Member is able to find additional savings whilst maintaining standards; this supports the Government's policy of providing good services at a lower cost. That policy is not to drive services down, but to make good and efficient savings, using officers' professional abilities and expertise. It would be helpful to know which charges will be increased or new charges introduced during the year which have not been specified in the Budget proposals.
2. We support the efforts to increase "Shared Living" provision and are pleased that the Cabinet Member will adopt our suggestion that the scheme should be more widely promoted, with better information, to increase the number of available places.
3. We note the intention to build upon the successful approach taken by the Government's "Troubled Families" initiative, and develop teams of professionals able to work with the whole family and reduce the number of individuals with which a family might have to deal.
4. There are concerns that the Council will not provide a Schools Improvement Service.
5. We are concerned also at the reduction in expenditure on Raising the Health and Education of Looked After Children: how will this support the aim of reducing the gap in achievements between Looked After Children and their peers?
6. We note that the Mayor and Cabinet are reviewing the proposed changes to nursery provision following concern from parents and carers.
7. We are concerned at the proposed removal of the Appeals and Complaints Committee; it provides an independent check on decisions, both for residents and Council employees.

We do not think the additional increase of 1.998% for unspecified "general services" can be justified. We pose the question "Has this administration considered all options for reducing costs?" Have the following been looked at thoroughly?

- A. Catering before Council meetings (whether committee meetings or full Council).
- B. Members' expenses, including subsistence and mileage.
- C. The civic car.
- D. Ongoing subscriptions.
- E. The cost of full time staff for the provision of Trade Union facility time exclusively
- F. The subsidy to the Playhouse.
- G. The review of surplus buildings - surely this should be expedited and, if buildings; cannot be sub-let or sold, shouldn't they be mothballed? Given the surplus capacity in Council buildings, shouldn't consideration be given to the transfer of activities delivered in the Langdale Centre to other under-used premises, and the Centre sold? Couldn't the site be used for housing - thus producing a capital receipt to reduce borrowing, and providing a brownfield site for residential use? Wouldn't this save the use of green field sites?
- H. We note that increased use of IT is proposed; in light of this has this administration thought about publications that could be scrapped, such as the business updates circulated to elected Members? Shouldn't such details be on the website and a link emailed to Members?
- I. Has consideration been given to more extensive use of IT to enable better and more efficient provision of services for residents? For example, a map facility should be included on the website so that residents reporting a problem can pin point it exactly and upload a photo.
- J. Has consideration been given to the need to encourage healthy eating and lower consumption of calories? We would question whether sufficient attention has been given to this aspect of a healthy lifestyle. The Budget proposals tend to focus on exercise. Now that the Council has responsibility for Public Health, has consideration been given to a long term and broader approach? Has consideration been given to work with schools and caterers to encourage use of school facilities to provide more cookery classes both during the day and in clubs after school and in holidays? This would both enable children and young people to learn to cook healthy meals, and to save money and budget better; furthermore, there should be less demand on the health service or social care in the future.
- K. Has consideration been given to encouraging use of school facilities for science clubs after school or in the holidays to support skills development? There is a shortage of skills in this field and we want our children to have the best chances of employment.
- L. Has this administration considered the use of junk mail opt-out being promoted on the Council's website with a view to reducing the amount of rubbish to recycle?
- M. Has this administration given consideration to sharing more services with other public bodies or sharing individual posts?
- N. Has this administration given any consideration to the potential use of The National Municipal Bond Agency which is expected to be open for business soon with the expectation of giving the opportunity for borrowing at cheaper rates?

In conclusion, we are concerned at the lack of detail from the Mayor and Cabinet for the proposed rises in Council Tax; for the avoidance of doubt, in our view this administration could avoid an increase in Council Tax save for that for use in Adult Social Care. We feel that more effort could be made to save money by cutting costs. A rise of 4% is an enormous blow to residents.