

Alternative Budget Proposals
from
the Main Opposition Group
of
Telford & Wrekin Council.

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1. OVERVIEW.

The Opposition key budget strategy proposals for 2015/16 include:-

Budget Deficit – It is noted that the 2015/16 base budget deficit for 2015/16 of £2.50m would have been severely reduced had not the Authority wasted £1.4m in an abortive attempt to locate a Hypermarket on its own land at Station Road Newport, while fighting rival schemes through the courts and the local community through the planning process. Had it not been squandered, we would otherwise have used this funding to support key frontline services on a one-off basis in 2015/16 and reduced the cuts to Adult Social Care.

Freezing Council Tax for next year - We continue with our policy of freezing Council tax, a policy first introduced during the last Conservative Administration. We welcome and fully support the Labour Administration's change in policy to freeze Council Tax during 2014/15, 2015/16 and again in 2016/17.

However, we point out that the opportunity for a freeze in 2012/13 and 2013/14 was rejected by the current Labour Administration against our advice which, as a result, drew over £2.0m from the pockets of local Council Tax payers. This hike in Council tax was made by the current Administration rather than accepting an additional grant from Central Government in its place.

It is hoped that this freeze recognises the severe pressure placed on many local people by the nation's financial situation and retains additional disposable income in the local economy.

Protecting Adult Social Care – The current Administration's proposals include continuing reductions to Adult social care of £2.641m in 2015/16. In addition and despite undertakings from the Council's Administration, ongoing overspends have continued and further savings of £1.933m will now need to be made resulting in a total savings target of £4.574m.

However, we welcome the current Labour Administration's change of heart and acceptance of our budget proposals for 2014/15 to provide a contingency reserve of £1.25m to cushion the impact of the worst reductions in Adult Care and Support services. Consequently we propose a further cushion of £2.0m for 2015/16.

Investment in Highways – Following many successive years of under investment, we propose to invest £23.7m in highways over 5 years.

This will completely clear the backlog of highways works in the Borough and return the highways to a very high standard desired by residents and needed by local business and investors. It is a more sustainable approach to continually filling pot holes.

Leisure Facilities – Leisure facilities in Telford & Wrekin are now of a good quality but fears remain that, in the current economic climate, individual facilities may be vulnerable to closure in an attempt to make further revenue savings. We would not support this approach and will seek to secure and maintain the existing provision in the Borough well into the foreseeable future.

Consequently, we will pilot some areas of Leisure provision to ensure that they are obtaining value for money for services obtained under current arrangements. The pilots will give managers a greater level of commercial freedom as opposed to the current arrangements which ensure that goods and services are only obtained from the Council itself through corporate procurement contracts.

These goods and services should be subject to greater competition and, under our proposals, Leisure Managers involved in the pilot schemes would be given full control of budgets and the ability to select goods and services from wherever they wish based on quality and cost. (Leisure Income and Expenditure see Appendix 1)

Free Swimming – The Administration’s proposal to provide free swimming for the over 50s at a cost of £50K per annum for the next 4 years may be well intentioned but is flawed in concept. We believe that this will adversely impact on Leisure facility income in three ways: firstly, it will remove current income received from the over 50s; secondly, capacity will be reduced at peak periods which will also adversely affect income and finally, the Administration’s proposals may further impact on income at fitness centres where swimming is an integral part of gym membership packages, (although removal of the swimming element in order to offer a reduced gym only package has been launched at the Phoenix Aspirations). It is also noted that over 60’s who are in receipt of pension credit and have a TLC card are entitled to swim during public sessions at a discounted rate of £1.

In its place we will introduce five free swimming lessons for the over 18s who are unable to swim, an activity that currently produces little or no income. This will have the effect of encouraging fitness, the ability to swim and thus help produce a greater demand and increased income for our leisure pools.

We will review the effect of this initiative after 12 months and have allowed £50k to cover any initial costs or short-term diseconomies that arise from running this pilot scheme.

Development of the Borough/Shaping Places – After 4 years of Labour control, T&W finds itself with a minority of Councils that have no adopted Plans in place to control building development across the Borough. The Council’s embryonic solution to this major failing is ‘*Shaping Places*’, a document which currently suggests building a further 20,000 houses many of which will be on Greenfield Sites in our countryside. However, even this document may not be ready until the end of 2016 during which time development across the borough will remain out of control.

Consequently, we will urgently review ‘*Shaping Places*’ in the first 100 days of a Conservative Administration and to this end we have allocated £50k for additional officer time to revisit the work undertaken by the current administration. This urgent review will reconsider the weighting given to proposed development sites and the amount and type of new housing actually required in the Borough.

We will also review ways in which Brownfield Sites can be incentivised and Greenfield Sites penalised to ensure that developers do not continue to take advantage of open countryside.

Provision of Secondary Education – Following on from the Council’s previous Conservative administration’s success in retaining multi-million pound funding for its

Building Schools for the Future programme (BSF), the current Labour Administration has worryingly made little provision for the inevitable future growth in secondary education numbers beyond 2018.

During the life of the current Labour Administration nearly 5,000 new residential units have been given planning permission across the Borough with many more in the pipeline. This population growth has been recognised at the primary stage by the council securing £2.8m in 'Section 106' contributions from developers across the Borough to provide 340 additional places, but nothing at all over the past 4 years to secure secondary education facilities for pupils working their way through the system.

At the same time, the current Labour Administration has bizarrely cut around 400 secondary places by removing one complete school in the Borough at a period of unprecedented house building. As the Borough does not now have 15% surplus places to allow accommodation of children from new developments over and above existing pupil numbers, it is failing to comply with its statutory duty.

This is a crisis waiting to happen as numbers are likely to peak by 2020/21 and is a failure which, due to lead times in building, must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Consequently, we propose using £0.5m of capital money to start immediate work on the location, design, planning and funding of future secondary education facilities.

To permit proper funding contributions to be gathered from Developers, we will scrap the current Administration's dogged adherence to the 'Section 106' mechanism and replace it with the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Council 'Prudential Borrowing' – At the time of forming the current Administration, Labour Councillors criticised Conservative "prudential" borrowing levels used to fund Borough wide regeneration, which would have eventually stood at £117.9m. Labour's '100 day budget' of 2011 reduced borrowing to £91.1m but has now seen an unprecedented rise to a record level of £213.5m in less than 4 years. Additional borrowing proposals could see this rise to in excess of £290m over the medium term.

However, although much of the additional debt is envisaged to generate a greater revenue return than the cost of borrowing and could therefore be used to protect front line services, the exposure to a future change in circumstances etc could prove a risk in the future.

We do not agree with this '*tax and spend*' approach and will seek to reduce borrowing levels and review future spending proposals as a matter of urgency.

Investing in Safeguarding Children from harm and neglect – We support the creation of an additional budget of £0.75m to be drawn down as required by the Council's safeguarding service for the protection of essential front-line early intervention and prevention services.

Partnering with other authorities – We believe that significant savings can be achieved over time by partnering with adjacent authorities. Part year savings of £125K are included as a part of this proposal in line with our recommendations made last year.

There are a number of areas within the council which can be usefully shared. These include: -

- Payroll
- Internal Audit
- Finance Team
- Legal
- Treasury management
- Senior Officer Team
- Architectural Services
- Highway maintenance – pooling of equipment
- Human resources

Spending Review – As indicated within our ‘Pilot proposals’ for the Council’s Leisure Facilities, we favour a smaller central structure at the authority, which currently costs the Council over £12m per year, with an emphasis on wider competition for the provision of services. T&W Council is now a much smaller organisation than it was 4 years ago which, given the likely direction of travel over the next few years, is likely to become smaller still. It is no longer the authority for which the current structure was designed.

We will commence a major spending and structure review to free up the ability of Managers to manage and provide services.

Youth and Adult Unemployment – We continue to fully support the Council’s initiative for reducing Youth Unemployment and welcome the recent reduction by one half over the past 12 months in the Borough’s unemployment totals

However, Youth Unemployment represents only part of the challenges in this area and we would like to build on this success and launch an initiative for adult unemployment which currently stands at 3.7% in Telford & Wrekin. The effect of redundancy and job loss can have a debilitating effect on the self-esteem, health and living conditions of people who have a wealth of experience and a great deal to offer. To achieve this we would allocate £0.5m from the £9.0m ‘one off’ revenue monies available to the Council.

Contacting the Authority / Customer Service

One of the key policies championed by the last Conservative Administration was the emphasis put on responding to inquiries and complaints by members of the public and enhanced contact facilities given to Elected Members and Town and Parish Councils.

At a time when enquiries are expected to increase by 27,000 by the end of this municipal year and waiting times to have a telephone call answered by the Council have, on occasions, risen to in excess of 20 minutes, the Labour Administration is proposing to cut one post from Customer Services and achieve a saving of £19.26K.

The service offered by the council, particularly to those who do not have other means of access, is third rate and unacceptable. It must also adversely affect the Council’s ability to respond properly to issues. It is therefore proposed to reinstate the post reduction and increase the resources dedicated to this vital function by a further

£40K. This will provide an extra 3 staff to that proposed by the Administration and improve the extremely poor service currently offered.

The standard of this key service will be monitored throughout the year with a view to significantly reducing response times.

Rights of Way

Surprisingly, two thirds of Telford & Wrekin is rural and the enjoyment and access to our countryside is an important resource to be enjoyed by the community. The health benefits of walking are well known and may have a greater benefit to the community than the offer of free swimming as previously mentioned.

This budget has been underfunded by the current Labour Administration and it is proposed to provide an additional £50k to enhance the work of the authority in this area on top of the existing proposals.

Borough Towns and Local High Streets

The Administration's commitment of £1.0m revenue to help revitalise our High Streets is welcomed and regarded as a vital initiative. However, unless used for borrowing, the effectiveness of the fund is diminished by the lack of capital monies which would be needed to provide physical infrastructure projects on the ground.

It is therefore considered beneficial to enhance the current proposals and include a capital fund of £1.0m to compliment the revenue money already suggested by the current Administration in order to widen the bidding process and scope of initiatives that can be undertaken by organisations in the community.

HIGHWAYS

Our proposals include an extra investment in highways of £23.7m over 5 years. This is based on advice from Highways Officers as to what incremental spending levels, above and beyond that contained within the current budget, are required to bring our highways back to up to an acceptable standard.

The current Administration's budget contains £7.2m over the next three years plus additional promised funding from Central Government. Nothing further has been allocated for years 4 or 5. Our proposal takes a 5 year view of the condition of the Borough's Highways and, consequently, we propose planned work over a longer term to clear the backlog and to improve and maintain standards Borough wide.

When complete, this work in itself will realise further significant savings by eradicating much unsustainable work on continually repairing pot holes and reducing insurance claims. There will also be additional benefits to the economy as the borough becomes more attractive for inward investment to business and more driver friendly.

Officers have confirmed that the MRP reserve will be sufficient to cover the revenue impact of our additional proposed Highways spending for 5 years. Future years would then require far lower levels of funding to maintain the condition.

Highways Capital Funding

	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Total 5 years
<u>Expenditure</u>	£,000	£,000	£,000	£,000	£,000	£,000
Annual						
Investment	9,500	9,500	9,500	9,500	9,500	47,500
<u>Funding</u>						
DfT Grant	4,181	4,014	4,008	2,778	2,778	17,759
Existing capital programme	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	6,000*
Additional Capital Funding Required	3,319	3,486	3,492	6,722	6,722	23,741

- It is anticipated that the existing base programme will be continued in 2018/19 and 2019/20; however as this is not currently funded it is included as an additional funding requirement.

Highways Backlog - The figures provided are an estimate of the costs of addressing the highways maintenance backlog and will allow for an improvement to the condition of the network, remove the existing backlog and address many of the current issues highlighted by residents, businesses and Councillors about maintenance on unclassified roads within the Borough. An updated Capital programme is included at Appendix 2.

A capital investment at this level would bring the highway network up to an acceptable standard and reduce the pressure on future years capital programme. An ongoing maintenance programme would be required to maintain the highway at this standard and to address pressures from growth in the network.

Some marginal savings in the annual reactive maintenance budgets for highways would be expected; however these savings would need to be offset against the increase in revenue borrowing costs as a result of the investment. Five years has been used as a planning and modelling assumption, but programmes could be adapted to other timeframes

SINGLE STATUS ACCRUAL AND EMPLOYERS NIC

The Council has accrued and retains a fund of £11.9m to meet 'Single Status' commitments and remains one of a minority of Authorities that has not yet settled this issue with its staff.

As staffing levels have significantly reduced from 2009 onwards (when the then Conservative controlled T&W Council started to cut senior management by 25%) the issue of Single Status is now anticipated to have a lower financial impact on the authority.

We therefore propose to reduce the 2015/16 Council contribution of £1.95m to this fund by £600K.

REVIEW OF STAFF TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Given the difficult financial position of the authority, it is necessary to review the terms and conditions of staff and streamline the benefits available. The bulk of the savings are proposed from changing the current mileage rate of 52.2 pence per mile to those set by HMRC (HM Revenues and Customs) of 45 pence per mile.

Apply HMRC mileage rates and ceasing essential car user allowances –

- Essential Car users allowance Savings: £460K
 - Casual user Savings £40K
- Total £500K

Note: - A number of Officers currently receiving an Essential Car Users Allowance would be able to claim recompense through the council’s standard millage allowance scheme.

OTHER SAVINGS

We have identified a number of roles and functions that can be undertaken by other team members and our proposals include the removal of

- Direct Financial Support for Trades Unions
- Indirect Union support via free accommodation
- Reductions to membership subscriptions
- Reductions to conference attendance

Union membership and participation is welcomed; however it is considered iniquitous that tax payers in Telford & Wrekin should be paying for Union representation for Council Officers, facilities which should be paid for by employees themselves. In many instances Council Officers also live outside of the Borough and we question why these facilities should be paid for by T&W Council tax payers.

Total £100K

RETAINED BUSINESS RATES

Additional business rates have been generated in the Borough from the private sector, in part due to the success of the Southwater development at Telford Town Centre, a project conceived and started by the last Conservative Administration.

It is proposed to use the full amount of this additional income for these budget proposals

Total £260K

2015/16 BUDGET PROPOSALS

One-off Investments	£m
Adult Social care	2.000
Funding for urgent review of Shaping places	0.050
Adult unemployment	0.500
Swimming Lessons for over 18s	0.050

Countryside Rights of Way	0.050
Customer Contact	0.060
Contingency for Spending Review	0.050
Total One-off Investments	2.760
Ongoing Investments:-	
Secondary school initiative debt charges	0.007
High Streets and Local Centres debt charges	0.013
Total Ongoing Investments (part year cost)	0.020
Total additional cost of investments in 2015/16	2.780
One-off savings	
Cancel free swimming	0.200
Cancel Pride Programme	0.750
Cancel Destination Telford Initiative	0.250
Total One-off savings	1.200
Ongoing Savings	
Retained business rates	0.260
Joint Working	0.125
Essential car users	0.500
Single Status	0.150
Trade Union Costs	0.100
Total Ongoing savings	1.135
Total additional savings in 2015/16	2.335
Net additional shortfall to fund from one-off resources in 2015/16	0.445