

**Summary of the Facebook Live event – 7<sup>th</sup> February 2022**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> February the Portfolio Holder with responsibility for finance and the Council's s151 Officer (Chief Finance Officer) hosted a Facebook Live event for members of the public to ask questions. There were also some questions received via social media or directly to the Communications team before the event. As at 21st February 2022 the session had been viewed 516 times on Facebook and 35 times on YouTube.

<https://www.facebook.com/westberkshire/videos/944793576188928>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnxL49RH4ts>

This paper is included in the pack for Full Council for members to consider as part of the overall budget setting pack.

Four statements were provided summarising the budget proposals.

- 1) A proposed Council Tax rise, including the Adult Social Care Precept, of 4%
- 2) Significant investment to continue to provide quality social care services of £5.2m
- 3) Proposed capital investment of £52.5m in education settings
- 4) Proposed up to £150 reduction in Council Tax for those individuals who are in work and are in receipt of Council Tax Support scheme

A summary of the public questions are included below and these were answered during the session:

- 1) Thought all a-d band were getting £150 refund on council tax, or is that on top of that?
- 2) 1. No, please don't hit people with a double whammy. As others have said, we are already have an N.I increase this year along with energy bills going up, inflation etc. This is not in step with the general public mood in my opinion. Everything else seems reasonable but as ever I'm sure the devil will be in the detail.
- 3) 1. No. 2.No. There is already going to be a NI increase of 1.25% from April, this will be spend on the NHS, health and social care in the UK. From April 2023 it will collected as a NHS and social care levy.
- 4) No, no and no. We was told it was all bands a-d? What about people like me who is disabled and cannot work due to health issues?
- 5) We're already going to be paying for social care in the NI increase and some of us won't even need it however we don't have a choice if we want to pay it or not. Social care payments should have been done like pensions. 4. The government said all people in houses in band A-D were getting £150 rebate, not 'up to £150', is this as well as?

- 6) Why even ask these questions? You won't take any notice or even read them. You'll do what you planned to do. This is just so you can tick the boxes that says you have consulted the public.
- 7) 1) Yes, The funding model is broken, the Tory and coalition governments have had 11 years to sort it out, but haven't. We are where we are, but it's notable no-one in the ruling group locally has the fortitude to speak an objection to Westminster. If you're unhappy with this situation simply stop voting for them. 2/3) loaded questions not worth bothering with. Who's going to object to ANY investment in schools or social care, even where it's inadequate? 4) No. This doesn't go far enough. Eligibility for the CTax discount scheme was cut by the Tory administration at West Berks so is actually claimable by fewer people than ever before. To then use it as a criteria for additional payments don't persuade me that the council is at all compassionate, as claimed by the council's leader. There's a great deal of tinkering around the edges since it's emerged - surprise surprise - that the social vandalism and victimisation of the poor in cutting the discount scheme has left some of the most vulnerable residents in the district impoverished. Why not simply reverse the damaging cuts that this council made in the past to extend eligibility? Also, why is being 'in work' a criterion? Presumably the idea is that the government largesse of UC will somehow be used to pay the £150 that the unemployed won't receive from the council. Laughable if it wasn't so cynical.
- 8) 1) Stop voting Tory. 2) See 1 3) See 2 4) See three
- 9) Are you saying that you are proposing the £150 reduction offered by Central government is only being offered by yourselves to those in the relevant tax bands that are in work and receive council tax support? Joke. 1. NO 2. Is this not what the NI hike is for? 3. YES - Parents already are asked to contribute to school costs, obviously funding is needed. 4. NO - Give the reduction to all those set out in central government announcement.
- 10) I don't think council tax should be increased many people are still suffering from furlough and trying to recover their family income. Furthermore the cost of living continues to rise and wages are staying the same! National insurance is already being increased. Shouldn't everyone be getting the council tax rebate things continue to be all those on benefits what about the families living on the breadline but not entitled to benefits?
- 11) AN INCREASE OF 4% WHEN ITS MEANT TO BE A £150 DISCOUNT! This just shows how disconnected the councillors are! @LauraFarrisMP you never did reply to my email about council tax like you said you would did you, I wonder why!

There were some further live questions on the night:

- 1) Does the council regret failing to raise the ASC precept last year, and how much has failing to do so cost the council with respect to the relative value of the receipts adjusted for rocketing inflation this year?
- 2) Does the council regret stating that the CAB was not an important service for vulnerable people and cut its funding before then relying on it heavily during the pandemic?

- 3) The commercial property portfolio has a valuation of £54.185m in the budget compared with an acquisition cost of just over £62m. One of the retail properties has halved in value. Given the £8m write down in value do you have concerns about the impact of the drop in value?  
I note a sum of £300k is forecast to be used from reserves to cover a shortfall in revenues. Can you tell where in the portfolio this shortfall is likely to come from?
- 4) Why did the budget challenge exercise not present a full range of options in balancing the books, for instance abandoning cllr allowance increases, or raising the tax rate above the referendum threshold?
- 5) Do you believe a 2% salary inflation assumption is fair given the impact of the cost of living crisis on your staff and inflation forecast to hit 7%?
- 6) I am disappointed to see no budget to directly invest in affordable homes and homes for social rent in the district. Why do we not have a programme of investment (apart from a very small JV with Sovereign) given the huge need for affordable homes in the district?  
Unlike just about every other investment in the capital plan, building affordable homes would generate a significant revenue stream to support the borrowing, and central govt policy is now to support LA's developing affordable housing  
Last years budget did include an amount to investigate the feasibility of a WBC housing company and I understood that was still an ongoing project. Is there any budget provision to follow up on this in 2022/23?
- 7) How much in "incentives" have been offered to private landlords to ease the housing crisis rather than to invest in social housing?
- 8) The budget assumes £1.4m of savings in ASC including £350k from reviewing care packages which "May impact some provider services/ clients/ families ". Given the crisis in social care is it fair to cut care packages for the most vulnerable?
- 9) Given the correlation between child poverty and child safeguarding issues, child mental health and family support, why is there a cut in children's services at all? Surely there should be growth in this area! Why show Adult services as one budget area but split children services down to smaller areas? What the actual budget cut for all services for children under 18?
- 10) There is an assumed saving of £450k from mental health services. Given that mental health is another area in crisis is it fair to make cuts here? I see this relates to shared funding but is it realistic to expect the health service to make good any savings when our own MP is raising questions in parliament about the poor performance of mental health services in West Berks?
- 11) On secondary schools, the Infrastructure Delivery Plan identifies a cost of £48m associated with Thatcham NE and Sandleford. The Draft Local Plan states that for Thatcham NE developers would only fund 50% of a new school. Where would the remaining 50% funding come from as there is no allowance for this in the 5-year capital plan.
- 12) How much are you spending on consultants and, more importantly, interim managers?

- 13) Whilst there is £268k for 'masterplan' regeneration for Newbury Town Centre there is nothing in the 5 year plan for Thatcham which I understand is due to start this year. Is this an omission?
- 14) Under the Environment Strategy Delivery Plan is there any funding for 2022/2023 to install solar panels on your buildings such as schools and care homes which are high energy users?
- 15) Are there any incentives for developers or potential landlords to create more social housing opportunity on sites such as brown field & former retail units etc?
- 16) The capital plan mentions a new playing field at Henwick Worthy. Will there be a public consultation to the need, and where this will be located.