

When Dorset Council was formed in 2019 we were told that our immediate ambition was to be 'safe and legal.' That limited ambition, with the addition of action on the Climate and Ecological Emergency, seemed reasonable in those early days.

And since then we've been buffeted by the Covid pandemic, a range of other budgetary pressures, particularly in Adult Social Care, and now the inflation crisis.

In this context, with gross expenditure set to increase by 8.5% to enable us to basically carry on doing what we've done this past year, no projected cuts to frontline services, and a large contingency fund to mitigate against inflationary pressures, this is another safe and legal budget, and we'll vote for it, because that's the responsible thing to do.

But, whilst thanking officers and members for all their hard work on this, we do feel this budget lacks ambition. Three areas where there is some agreement across this chamber are:

- First, the recognition, which has come through strongly in Scrutiny, that we must do much better on housing, to keep our young people and essential workers in the county
- Second, the need to reverse the ongoing decline of public transport, especially in rural areas, to improve the mobility of mainly younger, poorer and elderly residents
- and third, that we should be expediting a more commercial approach to our surplus assets to resource greater ambition in these and other areas, such as Youth Services. In Weymouth and Portland alone, 6 Youth Clubs have closed since the swingeing cuts implemented by our predecessor council and I'm disappointed that the Youth Fund has been frozen at £100k.

Significant improvements to housing and public transport would require significant resources but, to contemplate the re-introduction of Council Housing and, as Councillor Bryan has suggested, running our own public transport, we'd expect to see in this budget at least some modest funding for capacity building, but it's not there. In relation to climate mitigation we invested in staff to work out how to do it, prior to securing substantial funds to get on with it, and we'd like to see the same with social housing and public transport.

So, whilst we will support this budget, we think this Council can do better than safe and legal, and should be preparing itself to tackle some of our more entrenched issues.