

Budgets 2023/24 – Secunder response

Firstly, can I congratulate Cabinet Member – Gary Suttle and other members of the Cabinet, as well as senior officers Aidan Dunn, and his team in finance, along with other Service Directors and all those involved, for the excellent work that has been carried out in the preparation of the 2023/24 budget we have before us this evening. This is without doubt Chairman, a well-presented budget; a budget which has been zero based. A soundly based Budget which has enabled members of this council to get a good understanding of the challenges and opportunities we will face in the coming months and years ahead.

Can I echo the remarks made by Gary Suttle regarding the key role that the two cross-party Budget Cafes and the two Scrutiny Committees have played this year, in what has been a very challenging process. Ensuring we are able to achieve a balanced budget; achieved once again without the need for reductions in services and with a combined Council Tax and Social Care Precept coming in below the prevailing referendum limit of 5%. Such an approach has allowed for the involvement of members cross-party, fitting well with the pledge I made at Annual Council in May 2019 that we should work in a collaborative way across the chamber, working at all times to achieve the best outcomes for the people of Dorset. This healthy financial situation has not happened by accident, but through sound fiscal management of the business of this council, which has ensured, once again that we can achieve a balanced budget with no services cuts. This is quite unique in the current financial climate in Local Government.

We still of course have much more to do, but I believe we are clearly on the right track, moving forward at pace, having achieved so much since May 2019. Honouring our pledges to the people of Dorset.

Gary Suttle eloquently set out the assumptions on which the budget has been based, so I will not dwell on this further.

Chairman, we have before us this evening a well prepared, soundly based budget which meets the statutory requirement of being balanced without the need to reduce, or cut services. However, despite the considerable savings made to date of over £76.0m and those projected; along with additional funding from Government for Social Care, we have still needed to increase our council tax, albeit below the referendum limit. This was not a decision taken lightly, and I appreciate some of the concern expressed by Dorset taxpayers. However, we must do the right thing. We must look after those who need our help. The young people in care and those with age related health and mobility issues, continue to need our support so they can cope. Without those savings and increases in Council Tax we would have been faced with the prospect of reductions in discretionary services to balance budgets. Thankfully, we have avoided such a situation.

I will continue to press Government for multi-year settlements for future years. As well as the need for a better settlement, which accounts for the additional costs of providing services in a predominantly rural County; and a change to the formula used to calculate annual grant allocations, which currently favour urban areas rather than Shire Counties. As you are aware Chairman, I take every opportunity to be a strong advocate for Dorset with Government. Dorset deserves a better deal. For far too long we have been treated unfairly by successive Governments down the years. I am optimistic that we are making our case well for more central government funding and testament to that optimism was the better than expected settlement for 2023/24 for social care which has helped to mitigate risk and has underpinned the strength of this budget.

So, Chairman I will conclude by confirming my full support for this budget, as per the recommendations set out in the report before us tonight. This will be a budget that enables this Council to offer the best outcomes overall for the communities we serve. Helping to establish a basis on which to take this council forward in a strong, financially sound and structured way; enabling us to fulfil our ambitions to serve the communities of Dorset well, through transformation of council structures and investments in our front-line services. This fits well with the promises made to the people of Dorset when Local Government Reorganisation was first proposed and subsequently approved by the Government.

Yes, we remain bold and ambitious, but we must also make sure we maintain strong, structured and stable finances. This is the bedrock for being able to achieve our key priorities as set out in the Dorset Plan and the Cabinet Commitments. In other words, doing the boring bit well will always pay dividends. It is surely the foundation on which we can build for the present and the future for Dorset Council.

Thank you, Chairman