

## Group Leaders Budget Speeches

Cllr Nick Ireland

Back in late 2022 we were in the process of producing the budget for this financial year i.e. 23/24 and the papers published then identified a budget gap for the next year (that is the budget before us now) of around £13m.

Fast forward to this year's budget process and one thing that's bugged me, and other members I'm sure, is that we were told repeatedly that the One Future Council programme will save us £12m for 24/25 but no detail was provided as to what that would entail. All we were told that it would be underwritten from reserves.

Back in November '23 Cllr Beddow sent out an email to all members with a link to the OFC intranet site. In fact it was sent out twice as the first link didn't work. I looked at the site then and it was clear that it had existed since at least July '23 as there was a comment from a staff member to the effect that 'this means job cuts then'.

The site then contained no details of the programme in how the savings would be achieved. It appears to have a rapid refresh from this January, but still no details or specifics of how the £12m of savings will materialise.

It's not clear to me how you can state a nice, (and in the context of this budget, conveniently dovetailing) figure of £12m savings, when the details aren't known.

Now in the last weeks we've had a nice 'Brucie bonus' from government. £3.9 million of savings that were in the original "balanced budget" have disappeared into the ether (from where they had never actually emerged) and we have a different balanced budget.

This leads to three possibilities.

#1 - The forecast was accurate but this council, despite having over a year to do so, has been unable to specifically identify the savings that can be made, so we're filling the gap from reserves without explicitly saying so.

#2 - The forecasting was flawed (which in itself is worrying for future years), and was out by a factor of over 100% - £30m now required. Of that £18m is identified, but we're £12m short, or rather we were but now just £8.1m apparently, so we're filling the gap from reserves without explicitly saying so.

#3 - The means of achieving the stated £12m via OFC is actually known but the details are so unpalatable, especially with elections coming up in May, that the current leadership of this council is unwilling to divulge the details for fear of the consequences.

So I have one question? Which of the three is it?

Cllr Clare Sutton

Whilst 'safe and legal', we think our last 4 budgets lacked ambition, but we voted for them. I have 3 main points on this one.

First, on avoiding 'cuts in services', we haven't seen whole Council services practically disappear - as happened when Dorset County Council removed almost all support for Youth Clubs in 2016 - but we have seen an ongoing erosion of the services we provide. Planning enforcement is just one example, and I'm particularly concerned about implicit cuts which affect the most vulnerable, especially the higher eligibility requirements for adult social care.

The root cause is that successive governments have slashed funding to Dorset by half since 2010. In addition, as we know, the funding formula does not recognise that we have far more older residents than the average - about 30% are aged 65 or over compared to 20% nationally. I hope our next government, of whatever complexion, will restore responsible funding for local councils, and treat adult social care as a national service, like the NHS. Given where we are though, regrettably, we feel we've little choice but to support the proposed 5% Council Tax rise.

Second, Dorset Council has used almost £40 million of reserves to fund unplanned overspends since 2019. In this budget, the £8 million gap will ostensibly be filled by savings identified through the 'Our Future Council' programme BUT, despite repeated questioning by Cllr Heatley, Cllr Gray, and others, we still have no detail about how this will be achieved. Brian and I will address this in our proposed amendment.

On 'ambition':

1. We have a major housing crisis. And, we also have lots of surplus Council land and buildings. How are we going to keep young people in our county and attract, for example, the care workers who many of our residents rely on? Surely we must bring the two together, and start building social housing.
2. We have a public transport crisis, especially in our rural areas. Rather than continue to subsidise bus companies, we **MUST** work out how we can deliver this ourselves, aligned with the school and hospital transport we already provide.
3. We know that good quality, accessible Youth Clubs mean happier young people, better mental health, and less anti-social behaviour. We've just had a £4m 'present' from the government, but we heard about it too late to include in our amendment. Some of us – you know who you are! – have been talking about a cost of living fund for our youth clubs for some time and I hope that what we agreed will soon be implemented.

Cllr Rob Hughes

“Good evening, Chair, Members and Officers of the Council.

Cllr Rob Hughes for the Isle and Royal Manor of Portland and vice chair of the Independent Group.

We accept the proposed setting of this budget for the coming financial year ahead 2024/25

In these challenging times, when costs, inflation and interest rates have been changing every month it cannot have been an easy task to undertake, I’m sure.

I would personally like to pass on our thanks to all the officers and members of the council involved in the process as well as the members of the scrutiny committees for their careful consideration of all the planned costings proposed within this budget.

Keeping all our services running smoothly across Dorset for all our communities and residents within budget is key to the success not only of this council but also the next council after the local elections in May.”