

Budget Speech 2020/21

Madam Mayor,

It is my pleasure to present another positive Business Plan, Budget and Council Tax proposal. For 2020/21 we are able yet again to propose a modest Council Tax increase and yet maintain services for local people and in many areas increase them; but more of that later.

I would first like to look back over the last year. I think most people would agree it's been "interesting" both nationally and locally. Nationally the arguments over the EU has distracted the country from addressing many of the key domestic issues, such as housing and infrastructure, which affects all of our lives and our wellbeing. The rancour of the debate has polluted the political climate of the country and spread into local issues and behaviours where historically we have worked together to address the needs of Woking and its residents. For our residents, especially those from European backgrounds, the way people now speak and write so aggressively has undermined the positive values we have historically enjoyed and the courtesy we have previously shown to all. For me personally I was disappointed that such behaviour spilled over into this chamber. Let us all hope that following the UK exit from the EU on 31 January 2020 we can all move on together in a positive spirit of cooperation.

Despite these external challenges I believe we have still found a way to work together on some key issues:-

Sheerwater Regeneration

We have before us tonight the defining moment for our collective ambition to regenerate Sheerwater. I am grateful for all Members that have positively contributed to getting us to this point; I mean all because whether you were a strong advocate for the scheme or concerned about the impact on different groups or vulnerable people the input you have all made has helped us shape our proposal.

I hope later tonight you will resolve to proceed.

Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF)

We also have before us tonight an historic moment. We have been allocated a Grant of £95m to enable us to resolve a problem that has frustrated our predecessors; we have the ability to resolve the obstruction to the growth of the town caused by the A320 and its passage through Victoria Arch.

I know some Members are concerned about the potential need for us to use our Compulsory Purchase Powers (CPO) but I assure you, as we have demonstrated in Sheerwater, we will seek to agree terms with owners on a voluntary basis wherever possible. The fact that over 80% of current owners in the Triangle have sold to the Council and the majority of the others are in positive dialogue to agree terms I am hopeful that we will avoid the need to use CPO other than in exceptional circumstances.

I hope later tonight you will all agree the proposals set out in the report, which were also explained in the various briefings, and accept the Homes England Grant of £95m.

Green Belt Review and Site Allocations

During the year we completed the review and submitted our proposals to the Secretary of State. The Examination in Public has been held and we await the formal report of the Inspector. It is good that we have got this far and I hope that when we receive the report it will support the efforts we made to protect the green belt whilst enabling development to meet

future needs of the Borough. Hopefully we will be able to quickly conclude this matter following the publication of the report.

Climate Change

This issue is not new to us. I am grateful for the collaboration between Councillors Davis and Howard which have ensured we have maintained a cross party approach to this important issue. Over recent years we have been quietly getting on with our work to address climate change and biodiversity but we have not shouted about it; now we must.

The new impetus, to do more and do it sooner, is an encouragement to all and I hope that later tonight the Council will fully support the recommendations of the Executive on the next steps.

One notable achievement for me has been the delivery by Thamesway of Harrington Place; we need the homes that Thamesway is providing and I hope that with the investment we have approved we will see more notable buildings contributing to meeting our housing need and supporting our local economy. A personal pleasure for me, as those who have joined me know, has been the progress we have made on Victoria Square; I have enjoyed being the tour guide and all those that have joined me have been impressed by what we are doing. We will shortly be announcing some key lettings of space within Victoria Square and over next year the team will be securing the remaining tenants for the launch of the completed development in 2021/22.

Now to look forward to next year. As I believe you all know I am retiring at the end of this Municipal Year and whilst Woking will still be my historical family home, and I will continue to visit and support my mother, my retirement home is in Crinan where I will be enjoying the air, the sea and the views; which if you want a hint of them please visit me in my office. More about my retirement when we meet for my last Council Meeting on 2 April.

Madam Mayor, with your permission I would like to ask Cllr Azad to talk about the future.

Councillor Azad

Madam Mayor, I am grateful to you and Councillor Bittleston for this opportunity to address the Council.

We have been, and still are, in challenging times but the Service Plans and Budgets agreed by the executive present a positive approach designed to support the residents of Woking, particularly those in greatest need.

As Councillor Bittleston has said the key recommendations before the Council tonight in respect of Sheerwater Regeneration, the Housing Infrastructure Fund and Climate Change will, if approved, form a major part of our work next year and for a number of years to come. When taken together with the work to complete Victoria Square we will be undertaking a major positive transformation and revitalisation of Woking.

However, there is so much more to what we do, than just these major projects.

For it is not just these project that define us.

As in previous years, I am proud to say that there are no service reductions proposed in this budget, in fact we are providing improved services and more support to the most vulnerable in our society. Our day to day activities make a real difference to the lives of residents.

It is with this in mind that we have taken on, running family centres, from the County Council. This is a service which correlates with our historic community centres and enables services to be designed and managed efficiently at a local level. Where we think services are better delivered locally we are happy to take that lead.

When taken together with the support we are expanding in independent living, handyman service, care line, meals on wheels and the work with the Integrated Care Partnership, Mental Health Support and Domestic Violence Support, I believe, make a very positive contribution to our local communities.

With regards to government funding we are in a transitional period, a bit like Brexit, which makes looking into the future difficult.

However with a motivated government it will now be possible for the local government funding situation to be resolved and for us to have some future certainty on which to build our plans.

As the proposed reforms were again postponed the allocation of funding for 2020-21 is similar to the current year with the exception of New Homes Bonus where the grant is being phased out. We would hope that this will be replaced by an alternative reward scheme, however we wait and see.

This budget proposes a £5 increase at Band D for the Borough element of Council Tax. This is within the referendum limits and reflects a 2.08% increase compared to 2019/20.

We will implement the new legislation which allow us to increase the Council Tax payable for long term empty properties to encourage these to be brought back into use.

Once the budget has been set we will revisit our Medium Term Financial Strategy.

It is clear that as a Council we have great ambition, we need to manage the short term impacts carefully, the MTFs will consider the future challenges, risks and opportunities in more detail.

Our strategy is working, we can see the benefits in our town, we are attracting funding, investment and new business. The county council has chosen us as the town to relocate to and we welcome them with a view to more collaborative working and better outcomes for residents.

The Service Plans provide for continued improvement in our recreation facilities whether they are in our parks and gardens, children play facilities, sports halls, swimming pools or simply parkland to stroll across and enjoy.

These all contribute to the improvement in health and wellbeing of residents and when taken with our green infrastructure work on biodiversity habitats, and our environmental maintenance in the public realm, all substantially enhance the quality of the environment in the Borough.

Our planned programme of rainwater gardens have a significant positive impact on both reducing flood risk by slowing the rate of rainwater runoff into water courses but also create a positive habitat for biodiversity. Hopefully we will all see these arrive in our neighbourhoods and I encourage Members to explore the use of the Local Community Infrastructure Funds available to them to help bring more of these facilities into local areas.

The provision of Affordable Housing remains a real challenge to us all and I addressed the council last year to say the lack of housing is THE challenge of our times. It was a challenge last year and it continues to be going forwards.

I know the work already being done to reduce the risk of homelessness and help people find affordable homes is extensive, officers battle to help vulnerable people on a daily basis. And I'm pleased to say we will have increased resources on this vital work, thanks in part to a grant awarded by the government.

However, the lack of housing only exacerbates that fight to help those most in need. This means making difficult decisions. When Planning Applications come forward for new homes we need to approve them and not look for reasons not to. We need to lead from the front and make the case for housing within our communities.

Our commitment to addressing Climate Change should help us promote more affordable homes with greater access to public transport, walking, cycling and car share facilities.

Our initiative on “Earn your Deposit” has been well received but it is still early days so it will be a few years before we can demonstrate it provides the social mobility we sought. What I do know for those that have experienced it, it has brought hope.

There is so much more embedded within our Service Plans beyond that which I have highlighted. And I certainly look forward to working with you all to ensure that Woking goes from strength to strength in the next decade.

Councillor Bittleston

Madam Mayor, I am grateful to Councillor Azad for her comments and hope that the Council will in due course support her as Leader. For my part, in bringing this statement to a close I commend the recommendations of the Executive to the Council in the hope that all Members will fully support them.

Cllr David Bittleston

&

Cllr Ayesha Azad

Leader of the Council

Deputy Leader

13 February 2020