

March 2014 Report from COUNTY COUNCILLOR

ROGER HICKFORD

COUNCIL AGREES TOUGH BUDGET

Councillors have agreed budget proposals which show public services are in for tough times ahead to meet nearly £149 million in savings over the next five years. The County Council agreed the draft budget proposals at this week's meeting. The proposals have been put forward to meet the huge savings required for 2014/15 and the following years.

The report warned that there are no easy solutions to meet the savings and that some services will need to be cut or reduced as the Council has already saved £128 million in the last three years. The Council agreed to increase Council Tax by 1.99 per cent to help protect frontline services.

Councillors also agreed a £1.4 million spend on transport improvements, children's centres, mental health services, adult social care and winter gritting. A decision to withdraw funding to Cromwell Museum has also been deferred for an extra year to give more time for plans to be developed to find alternative management solutions.

Cambridgeshire is one of the hardest hit authorities in the country and has had a reduction in the Government's Settlement Funding Assessment of 20.9 per cent (£29.9m) over the next two financial years. The County is also the lowest funded for education in the UK and has the fastest growing population. This means the Council is seeing more and more demands on its services – especially for those who are the most vulnerable - as more people need them or are living longer and require more expensive care services. Increased population puts a £9 million strain on the Council's budget every year while inflation also annually adds extra pressure on decreasing funds.

Cambridgeshire County Council is expected to make savings over the next year (2014/2015) of around £38 million. This is following savings of £42 million last year (2012/2013), and a further £32 million this current financial year (2013/2014).

The Council will continue to look at sharing assets and buildings with other public bodies as it has been doing successfully through the Making Assets Count programme. This includes leasing the Castle Court building on the Shire Hall site in Cambridge. The Council will also be making it even easier for residents and businesses to access services online which is easier for many and reduces costs to the public purse.

Savings will continue to be made in Corporate Services and shared services with a total of £4 million expected to be saved.

The Council has continued to look to drive out efficiencies; further significant savings are expected from Home to School transport contracts for example. Additionally, work to prevent the escalation of needs is continuing with savings planned from reducing the number of children that need to be looked after by the Council and the number of vulnerable adults we support through intervening early and effectively. However, the financial challenges are such that reductions in services and support are unavoidable.

Adult Social Care will continue to target support for the most vulnerable but will look at reducing the demand for services, working more with communities and a reduction in the support offered to some service users.

The service will also continue to support people early to preserve their independence and stop them from needing more critical care.

In Children's Services focus will be put on more focussed work. There will also be a reconfiguration of Children's Centres and an overall reduction in the services they provide. Council agreed an extra £200,000 will be put into Children's Centres to help support this reconfiguration. The Council's funding for supporting Early Years settings and providers will also be reduced.

In Economy, Transport and Environment there will also be reductions in some services and where appropriate investigations will be carried out into looking at income streams on a user pays basis. Investment will continue in Cambridgeshire Future Transport to provide targeted public transport but consideration is being given to scaling back some services, such as winter maintenance. Some £200,000 has been agreed to transfer into a special winter gritting reserve to allay the introduction of cuts.

Public Health funding still remains ring fenced by Government and will be using feedback from You Choose and evidence to make sure services are targeted.

TRANSPORT TO BENEFIT FROM CHANGES TO BUDGET PROPOSALS

Transport will be the main winner in alterations to the budget agreed last week.

After listening to the public and opposition groups, the Conservative Cabinet has agreed to earmark an extra £500,000 to invest in transport improvements. A cross-party group of Councillors will be formed to decide how this money is spent.

An extra £200,000 will also be put into Children's Centres and an additional £200,000 for mental health services in order to support these services through a period of transformation.

It is also agreed to reduce the level of savings and support change in older people service and in learning and physical disability services, by reducing the savings targets by £300,000.

The mild winter so far means the Council has not spent its entire gritting budget, meaning £200,000 can be held back and put into next year's budget.

An innovation grant of £28,000 is also being created to encourage innovative new ways of providing public transport services.

The extra cash – nearly £1.5m in total – has come from £1m money saved from capital building projects and £500,000 from improved Council tax collection rates.

ROAD SAFETY IS A PRIMARY CONCERN FOR YOUNG SCHOOL PUPILS

Pupils from across Cambridgeshire will get the opportunity to sit as jurors in their very own courtroom drama designed to make them think about road safety and accident prevention.

The Road Safety Education Team is providing a two week tour of the interactive play 'Courtroom' which will be performed at schools weeks beginning 10th and 24th March.

This high energy, interactive play targets key stage 2 pupils (7-11 years) and takes the entire audience into a hugely entertaining, larger than life courtroom. Using the audience as jury members, the judge and lawyers go over events leading up to a road traffic accident and try to establish how this kind of accident can be prevented in the future.

Courtroom allows the audience to think about road safety and reach their own verdict on what causes accidents and how they can be prevented. The play includes vital Road Safety messages relating to pedestrian safety and the use of seatbelts.

TRANSPORT STRATEGY TO TAKE STEP FORWARD

Councillors have finalised a Transport Strategy for Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire aimed at improving accessibility and facilitate the 35,000 new homes due to be built to 2031. The Transport Strategy for Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire has been developed working with partners and based on feedback from public consultation.

It aims to give better transport choice including more and better cycling, walking and public transport measures.

Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire has one of the most dynamic and forward looking economies in the UK, and will continue to attract growth in jobs and population. Working alongside Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council we have developed a Transport Strategy to align and integrate with the ambitious growth plans, to ensure the transport network can cater for the predicted 44,000 new jobs and 35,000 new homes that will be created here by 2031."

The strategy is nearing completion and sets out how to keep the travel network moving despite the rising population and increase in demand, by enabling more people to use public transport and to cycle and walk.

Last summer, during a ten week public consultation, held jointly with Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council's consultation on their own Local Plans, the Strategy received over 800 direct responses from local residents, employers and other organisations.

Over 76% of respondents agreed with the strategy's approach of increasing the use of sustainable transport while maintaining traffic levels at a similar levels to now; and around 75% agreeing with attempting to achieve this through increasing road space for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

Other key findings include:

- Approximately 60% agreed with restricting car traffic movement in some areas if it resulted in a boost in walking, cycling and public transport usage
- Around 50% supported increasing park and ride spaces available, at the expense of reducing the availability of free street parking in the city.
- Nearly 80% of respondents agreed with the strategy approach of enabling more people to use public transport for at least some of their journey

The strategy was finalised by the Joint Strategic Planning & Transport Member Group (JST&PG) meeting on 6th February and by Cambridgeshire County Council's Cabinet on 4th March.

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