

**BUDGET SPEECH BY COUNCILLOR BARRY NORTON  
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL 26 FEBRUARY 2014 MEETING  
OF WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Mr Chairman, as Leader of the Council, I have the duty, and once again the pleasure, of presenting to Council the recommendations of the Cabinet in relation to the Budget for the forthcoming financial year 2014/15.

I extend my thanks and appreciation, as ever, to the members and officers of the Council for their valuable contributions to the budget process.

I particularly extend my thanks to Cllr Hoare and all my Cabinet colleagues for their efforts over the last few months as we have put together not only a balanced budget in another year of increased austerity in our public finances but also set out how we will finance our commitment to Rural Broadband, an initiative which we believe will have ongoing benefits for residents, businesses and our local economy in West Oxfordshire.

This time last year I said the whole landscape of local government finance had changed as the government sought to enable Councils to become less reliant upon nationally distributed resources and more reliant upon locally raised resources. This year we see the true impact of this coming into effect in our budget papers.

I also said last year that this new approach was not perfect but that it put some of the resource distribution back in our own hands. This latest budget process demonstrates that the new approach is not perfect as we have again been faced with late settlement figures and late guidance on treatment of business rates income. But decisions this Council has taken on providing new homes and businesses have been rewarded and we have been able to pass this on to residents in the form of protected services and reduced real terms tax levels.

A few months ago this did not look possible with a proposal by government to transfer a portion of our New Homes Bonus to the unelected Local Enterprise Partnership – but local government fought hard against this consultation and won – much to the benefit of the residents of West Oxfordshire. We are grateful to our own member of parliament for taking this matter up on our behalf.

The budget for next year includes funding increases from business rates in new or extended businesses, for example the new Premier Inn in

Witney, Morrison's store in Carterton and, of course, RAF Brize Norton. Hopefully we will see future increases with West Oxfordshire being a business friendly place, securing jobs and prosperity for our residents whilst retaining all that is special about our district.

Over the last three years we have frozen Council Tax for residents when inflation has been running at levels above 3% making a real difference to households who are still having to find extra money to pay for energy, fuel and food costs. No matter how small our portion of Council Tax is we remain committed to delivering the very best value for our residents.

Both Councillors and Officers continue to be united in this approach to improving the value for money of our services and both have made sacrifices through pay and allowances freezes over recent years. My thanks are offered to all that have made these personal sacrifices in these difficult financial times whilst continuing to serve this Council with loyalty and commitment. This goes not only in respect of their day to day roles, but also in respect of the extraordinary efforts that have been put in during recent months to assist with flooding issues – this is often hidden from the public with media focus on blue light services but many more play a supporting role.

In terms of efficiency savings our shared services approach with other councils, in the main with Cotswold district has now reached savings of £4m between the two Councils since we started. Looking ahead we are now generating £2m per year between us which means our share of £1m a year is producing an annual and recurring tax saving of £25 per Band D property. This remains a central plank of our efficiency approach which has enabled us to support front line service provision to residents whilst our funding streams have been reduced. It is clear that future funding from central government will remain tight, so we must continue to seek out innovative ways with partner councils to provide services in even more cost efficient ways.

The savings set out above together with other significant savings made throughout the Council means we can once again approve a budget which balances cost pressures with savings. In addition to this we are now close to producing a truly sustainable financial strategy which not only balances the revenue budget but which supports our underlying capital programme as well. This will support our low Council Tax now and also into the future.

Two weeks ago Cabinet was able to confirm yet again proposals to protect key voluntary sector organisations from significant grant

reductions next year. This is the third year we have deferred this reduction as we seek to protect those hardworking voluntary services that have struggled with fundraising in the tough but now improving economic climate, but whose work is beneficial to local people and our communities.

To finance the Councils revenue expenditure and capital programme, Cabinet is proposing an annual Council Tax of £81.63 at Band D for 2013/14, for the fourth year running a freeze in the current charge.

The Council is grateful to the government for giving us some funding to help the Council provide this freeze which will benefit all taxpayers at a time when certain increasing prices are a particularly large strain on household and individual finances. Over the last four years this equates to a 'real terms' cut in tax of around 15%. Make no mistake this is no mean achievement by our council and members and staff are to be congratulated in pursuing policies which provide first class services to residents without increasing charges to our council taxpayers.

Once again I am confident that the proposed freeze of our Council Tax will leave our council levying the second lowest charge out of the all the shire District Councils in England and still the lowest in Oxfordshire by some margin – meeting one of our key Council objectives.

Building on last year's budget - for the second year in a row I am delighted to say that to balance our budget over the next year the Council will **not** need to use general fund balances. Future years will of course continue to bring us challenges and some £1m of efficiency savings remain to be made in line with the refreshed Medium Term Financial Strategy. I am confident that we will meet these challenges but this will be tough and will require us to continue to deliver on the actions set out in the strategy.

Of course, not only are we meeting the budgetary challenges but we also continue to provide first class services to our residents. The Council is proud to maintain its policy of free car parking throughout the District which contributes to the vibrancy of our Town Centres and helps underpin our buoyant economy. Despite ongoing difficult times, unemployment and crime rates within the District remain some of the lowest in the Country and continue to fall.

To support all our small and medium sized retailers in Town Centres the government has introduced business rates discounts for 2014/15 and 15/16 and we are grateful for that decision. We ourselves have continued our support for Town Centre retailers with our new retailer

support scheme giving retailers access to expertise at a tiny proportion of its cost. This scheme has been hugely oversubscribed from across the District and we will reflect over coming months how we can meet this pent up demand.

Our free garden waste collection service has assisted the Council to climb into the top 10 performing councils for recycling and our benefits service performance is also one of the top performers. Tourism continues to deliver increased spend in the District with some £268m spent in 2012/13 up 3% on the previous year – supporting more jobs for local people.

Last month Cabinet and Council supported the inclusion of a sum of £1.6m in the Capital Programme to support the roll out of High Speed Broadband to those parts of our District which would not otherwise receive it from the commercial sector or via the County Council BT contract. I am pleased that in this budget we are able to reduce our call on New Homes Bonus in the revenue account and with that unused funding establish an earmarked reserve to finance a significant portion of this commitment. I am hopeful that during the year our decision to enter a business rates pool with the County Council and Cherwell will enable us to complete that funding package.

In light of all this Mr Chairman, I think the Council Tax proposals set out by Cabinet represents continuing excellent Value for Money for West Oxfordshire residents. An £81.63p annual charge equates to an average of a little over £1.50p per week per Band D household for all services provided by our District Council and our charge remains less than half the national average charge, ensuring local residents continue to benefit from our determination to use as little of taxpayers money as possible whilst continuing to provide the services which help to ensure our district continues to be recognised as one of the best places to live, work and visit.

I move and commend the budget to Council.

Thank You

Barry Norton.  
26 February 2014.