

INTRODUCTION

Today I am pleased to present the second budget of this West Oxfordshire Alliance made up of a partnership of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green Councillors that form this administration since May 2022. We present is a balanced budget with a surplus of £5,107 that shows our commitment to maintaining the financial stability of this Council.

We have been clear over recent years that this council belongs to the people of West Oxfordshire and our investment in our staff, and therefore our services are of paramount importance in setting a budget because this is not just a budget that adds up the numbers on a spreadsheet.

It is a budget that delivers what local people have told us they want to see us deliver while also carefully managing our finances during what is a challenging time for all local government.

ACHIEVEMENTS OVER THE YEAR

The background to this budget is the ambitious Council Plan, which this council approved.

It is a plan based on what our residents told us they wanted this council to focus its efforts on. We have five priorities of equal importance:

1. Putting Residents First
2. Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
3. Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
4. Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
5. Working Together for West Oxfordshire

Over the past year we have made real progress across the board.

When it comes to our commitment to putting residents first, we have.

- Installed new technology so that residents can now watch our meetings from wherever they may be.

- We have continued in our commitment to better, more meaningful consultation whether it be for our new local plan or seeking feedback from the young people in the district who are seldom heard.
- We have continued our Executive on Tour – taking our decision making out to local communities so people get more of a chance to engage with us.
- We have opened our new council chamber facility – taking the opportunities of external funding and much needed maintenance and in doing so have created a community space that will be used by our residents and community groups across the district far more than in the past.

In our efforts to enable a good quality of life for all we have:

- Invested in and regenerated Marriotts Walk which has seen new shops opening and the hugely successful Christmas Market that saw nearly 15,000 shoppers visiting the centre. We are also working on supporting other markets across the district.

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Creating a better environment for people and wildlife is crucial along with tackling the climate and ecological emergency. In this area we have:

- Seen great progress in our work with Thames Water to stop the polluting of our waterways. We held another successful, sold-out Waterways Day to discuss action on protecting our waterways. We have also made changes to our planning process to make sure any new homes have the sewage treatment infrastructure they need.
- Officers continued to work tirelessly to reduce our carbon footprint as a Council and across the district. This includes work to install low-carbon heating in our buildings, creating more natural habitats and expanding our electric vehicle fleet.

At the heart of a lot of our work is working together. For this priority we have:

- Launched WestHive, our Crowdfunding website to help local communities access the funding they need. This programme is designed to help residents

and groups to collaborate and deliver locally led projects that are genuinely supported by local community networks, businesses and the Council. We have already seen our first project funded through the site and we expect many more will follow.

- Worked closely with our residents, campaign group and
- town and parish councils to help them respond to the proposed Botley West Solar Farm project.
- Continued work on our local plan with over 2000 responses to our latest consultation. The Local Plan will be crucial for the whole district, and we are committed to delivering it in partnership with our communities.

On top of the progress, we have made against our priorities we have also continued to deliver council services. In the past year we have:

- responded to over 775 fly tips.
- answered 74,361 queries through our customer services team.
- emptied over 6.83M million bins.
- Processed over 2600 planning applications.
- supported over 170 households to avoid them becoming homeless.
- investigated 390 abandoned vehicles.
- processed over 750 benefits and financial support claims for people in need of support.
- In 2023, our work with housing providers has helped us deliver a range of affordable homes, including 164 rental and 99 shared ownership properties.
- We also built 4 First Homes, a new form of affordable home ownership, bringing us a step closer to meeting our community's housing needs.

Most importantly, we have been supporting people and communities during the cost-of-living crisis.

Many people from all walks of life struggle from time to time and during the cost-of-living crisis many people have found themselves in difficult positions they were not expecting.

We have continued to support communities through the cost-of-living crisis by providing funding to our amazing community groups that provide support to local people such as foodbanks and community larders.

There is support available from us at the District Council along with many our national and local organisations. We have pulled together a wide range of resources our residents can go to for support whether that be help with energy payments, benefits, or childcare costs through to making your home more efficient.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Now while we have made good progress, there is still much more for us to do and that is where this year's budget comes in.

Before I get to specifics for this year it is important, we recognise the national context in which we set this budget.

This year has seen local government funding enter the national spotlight. Multiple councils have issued section 114 notices and many more are warning of significant financial challenges.

As you will all be aware local government funding has reduced over a number of years. We have lost 60% of our funding in real terms as government grants have disappeared and inflation has increased costs.

We also need to consider and prepare for the fundamental changes to Local Government Finance by central government which are expected in 2026/27. If these go through as we have been told, we could lose up to 38% of our current funding.

Single year settlements add to the financial strain on the Council, restricting our ability to confidently plan for more than one year in advance.

And on top of the funding challenges there is the prospect of a general election and inflation remains high, adding a lot to the costs of running the organisation.

For this budget we have made reasonable assumptions with regards to this pressure and uncertainty and these assumptions underpin the 2024/25 budget and also our Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

THIS YEARS BUDGET

Now with that context in mind I would like to propose the budget for the next financial year.

This is a balanced budget, continuing to deliver local services but also gives us opportunities to invest in improvements across the district. It also sets us up for the future funding challenges, creating a sound platform for us to move forward.

Given the reduction in government funding, we work diligently to attract external funding whenever possible. Over the past year

- The Climate team, in collaboration with other Oxfordshire authorities, secured £298k of Innovate UK funding to enable nature-based carbon offsetting in Oxfordshire.
- The Climate Team submitted an application for £1.6m Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS) 3c funding for the decarbonisation of Windrush Leisure Centre.
- The Leisure team secured £355k of Swimming Pool Support Funding from Sport England. to assist with the running costs of swimming pools in the district.

It will be crucial to continue this work over coming year to make the most of external funding opportunities to offset some of the core funding we are losing. We don't know when or where these opportunities will come up, but we will be sure to attract as much external funding as we can.

As I said before this budget also looks to build on the progress, we have made against the priorities set out in the Council plan. I would like to highlight some key areas of investment that we believe will deliver for local residents:

- A Strategic Housing Development & Enabling Manager who will help us to shape a more proactive approach to increase the supply of affordable housing within the district.
- A Youth Development Officer to help us better support young people and build on the results and findings of the recent Youth Needs Assessment where over 3000 young people engaged.
- A Nature Recovery Officer to help deliver the Council's Nature Recovery Plan.
- A Climate Change Officer post made permanent to continue to deliver against the ambitious target of carbon neutrality by 2030.
- A capital allocation for a phased waste fleet replacement programme. This will ensure that we continue to deliver the most efficient service. A phased approach will also allow us to take advantage of new technologies as they mature and become more reliable and spread the cost over a number of years – thus reducing the amount of external borrowing needed.

And finally, John Donne famously said, “no man is an island” and we cannot make progress, on addressing the challenges facing West Oxfordshire, as a Council standing alone.

Partnership is the key, meaningful partnership with our town and parish councils, and beyond, to ensure we are working together in the most effective way.

Working together we can create more opportunities to invest and attract inward investment so that our residents have secure jobs, housing and a healthy and green environment to sustain a quality of life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have taken a prudent approach to the budget setting which is appropriate as we enter turbulent waters in terms of local government finances with funding reforms, continued single year settlements and a general election on the horizon.

This administration will continue to deliver against our priorities and keep a steady hand on the tiller of our finances.

This balanced budget for 2024/25 is a sign of our commitment to our residents, local businesses and other organisations that we will continue to take action on the issues that matter most to them.

West Oxfordshire is a fantastic district with amazing people, and we will continue to work hard as an administration to support residents, business and communities over the next year.

I commend this Budget for approval.