

District Councillor's Report – March 2023

Budget

The headline for the 23/24 budget is that HDC are breaking even, have a balanced budget and are not using any reserves or savings to achieve this. The news gets better as we are not making any cuts to front line services either. Looking at our peers it doesn't seem that there are many budgets that look like this and it should be a point of celebration for residents.

The HDC increase to council tax for 2023/24 is 3.31% or £5 a year, a distance behind the average CPI inflation figure for 2022 of 9.1% and the lowest increase in real terms since at least 2014. The rise, which amounts to less than 10p a week, or 3.31%, means that the average household will only pay a total of £3 a week for all the services provided by Huntingdonshire District Council.

We are in this position for a few reasons of our own effort:

- We have recruited an excellent new S151 officer whose arrival at about the same time as the joint administration has galvanised the very capable team.
- Everything has been looked at from a different perspective which has swept away items that have been placed in some sort of backlog or wish list for many years.
- This pruning has reduced the demand on the interest payable budget, because we won't be borrowing, we don't need to pay interest.
- With higher inflation has also come higher interest rates and our treasury management has been strong. In 2022 the average interest rate we receive has risen from 0.08% to 1.76% which, on our average bank balance, will generate about an extra £950k and this will benefit the budget for the year ahead especially as interest rates may increase again.

But we are also in this position because we been a bit lucky - despite being hit with the second "once in a lifetime" event in three years, inflation being higher in one year than the compound total of the previous seven and with certain costs like energy going well beyond that headline inflation figure.

- Central government grants have been slightly higher than expected with a 3% funding guarantee that has increased budget requirement income by just over £1m.
- We have received further new homes bonus payments, simplistically as other councils did not hit their targets, which has left money in that pot that could be distributed to us – it is not the £2m plus of the past, but instead £1.2m.
- Central government have increased business rates but haven't made the NNDR re-baselining changes that have been threatened for many years so we find that we are retaining more of this money than expected.

We now find we have a couple of years of leeway before we are hit by the "fair funding" changes that threaten to be very hard on district councils, as they remove grants and alter NNDR redistribution to favour county and metropolitan authorities. While there remain a lot of challenges, particularly around the impact of inflation and the resulting higher prices, we need to grasp the opportunity that has arisen to break the cycle and plan to make the longer term more sustainable.

HDC Priorities and New Corporate Plan

Over the coming months, the council will look to set new priorities as part of a new Corporate Plan, which builds on this budget and will also link to the council's other strategies including the Climate Strategy and Huntingdonshire Futures Place Strategy.

During 2023 we will be setting new priorities for the council, and we are ambitious with what we want to achieve as we look to implement a new Place Strategy, Huntingdonshire Futures, which sets out a vision for the future of the district to 2050 along with a new Climate Strategy and preparation works for a new Local Plan.

District Council appoints interim Managing Director

Oliver Morley will take over as Huntingdonshire District Council's interim Managing Director from Wednesday 1 March following the departure of Joanne Lancaster.

Oliver, the District Council's Corporate Director for People, was officially appointed at a meeting of Full Council on Thursday 15 December but will start on 1 March following the departure of Jo Lancaster who stepped down after nearly 10 years in the post. Recruitment for a permanent Managing Director will begin in the Spring.

More on Buses

Last month I discussed the Ting bus service as way of enjoying on-demand, tailor made bus trips. Ting is a form of DRT (Direct Responsive Transport). Ting covers the West Huntingdonshire area including key towns such as St Neots, Huntingdon, Sawtry and surrounding villages. The service has been introduced to West Huntingdonshire to improve transport links for those living in rural areas, removing young people's dependence on parents for lifts and allowing local residents to lessen their reliance on cars.

I suggested to give Ting a try and recommended the download of the Vectare DRT app to your



phone. Following feedback from residents, I realise that I should have mentioned that you don't need an app to use the service. Single and return **Ting trips can also be booked over the phone, by dialing 0115 777 3187.** I understand

that the operator, Vectare, will book a taxi to get you home should you get stranded without a bus. Apologies to those who were given the impression that Ting is an 'App Only'

Wishing you well,

Martin

Martin Hassall

District Councillor for Buckden, Diddington and Southoe

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