

## **The Budget 2016/17**

### **Public meetings summary**

#### **Context for the meetings**

The council held four public open meetings to discuss the budget and outline how it intended to balance the pressures in the context of a reducing Government grant and increasing demands on key services.

The discussions, questions and answers were well received by the audience and there was a clear sense of realism reflected by those who attended. There was an understanding that the council was facing tough financial challenges and that it was being honest and open in its dialogue with the public on the plans and proposals to meet the challenges.

The presentation set out that to balance the budget for 2016-17 the council would increase council tax by 2% this year as well as instigating a 2% levy to cover the rise in social care costs.

The council has not raised its council tax rate for 6 years but given the decrease in grants from the Government combined with the pressures and demands on key services; this was no longer an option.

The increase in council tax next year will equate to an increase of £48 a year on a band D property.

The detailed questions and responses from each meeting are shown below.

#### **The summary of questions – focus on the following subject matters;**

##### **Finance**

- Business rates and collections
- Allocation of capital budget
- Level of council reserves
- Money saved through becoming a unitary council
- What about implementing a flood levy
- Income generation – raise charges for services such as leisure

##### **Highways and transport**

- Transport issues and what about innovative solutions
- Highways concerns – impact of A303, army basing road networks around the Plain
- Road sweeping, litter picking and leaves clearance – number of issues
- Will Ringway be better than Balfour Beatty

##### **Economy and planning**

- Army basing – who pays for the infrastructure required?
- Future development and plans to deliver housing
- Local searches and the time it takes
- Implementation of broadband

## Communities

- Sharing services with other local authorities
- The ageing population and demand for services
- Increasing the number of volunteers

## Devizes budget meeting

1<sup>st</sup> February 2016

**Q. The chancellor gave us money from business rates, what happened to that? And won't we get more now we are putting rates up?**

DT The money is distributed around the country and we don't get what we collect. As Wiltshire has a relatively well-off economy – and, our businesses are doing well –for every pound we collect in business rates we only get to keep 32 pence. If there is a move to devolution where we are allowed to retain our business rates we won't actually get more money, but will we have more control.

JSc This devolution could come in 2020, but we don't know what this means yet. We haven't been told how much we will actually get. We only get 32% and the rest goes to weaker economies. If we got 80% of our business rates, we wouldn't need a penny from the government. But we will have to wait for the detail.

MH There will be a national working group set up to look at this. The DCLG figures actually show us getting less. We could be self-financing, and we are looking into it with the Government.

**Q. Surely business rates could go up by 2% then?**

JSc Unfortunately, that's not how it works. We don't set business rates, the Government does. We won't accept a decrease in our business rate under any circumstances so we will have to see.

**Q. Many of the lower value services really do have an impact especially on the young and elderly - transport for example. Is any effort being made to look at innovative solutions?**

PW We are looking at it. We are out to consultation. We've already had 5,000 responses. We want a sustainable transport service for the future. This solution needs to be fit for purpose for 5 or 10 years at least. Option 24/7 is one such example, and if that is working anywhere else with a similar situation to ours, I would love to see it. We will be working hard to do what we need to do.

JSc We are not reducing the budget or service in the coming budget year.

PW We need to be realistic, but we do want to make this work for everyone so they can get to school, jobs and services.

DT Our Link service is one of the best in the country - volunteer drivers and the TransWilts train service is fantastic. The increase in that service has really added some resilience to the way people can travel around Wiltshire. It's now a 2 hour service whereas before we negotiated it was only twice a day and at times that made it difficult for example to get to and from work.

- Q. We don't live in west Wiltshire, we don't have the railway, we haven't had the road investment, Devizes and Pewsey will be one of the hardest hit. We need investment. We need an innovative transport solution.**
- JSc That's why we are doing this over such a long period. The A350 is getting funding as it's seen as a key corridor from the Midlands to the coast. Also, we need to know exactly how any changes will impact on people. And we currently fund more buses than any other county in the country.
- Q. The Link scheme is fantastic, but it is not the whole solution. What are the advantages of devolution for Wiltshire?**
- DT We will see. We are at the forefront and we are taking it seriously.  
JSc Our devolution bid is about the joining up of public services to save money so we can use it in a better way. The government drive is about more houses, more jobs and better skills. We need to hit those targets to satisfy the government. If it's not right for Wiltshire, we will not do it. But it's a little way off as the government is looking at the cities first. Much better joined up health and social care is what we can really get out of this, but it's not at the forefront of the government's current agenda.
- PW If we are successful on the A350 corridor, it will stop traffic coming through the east of the county. It's one of our key developments the north south route from the midlands to the south coast ports and it will help reduce the HGV traffic that currently goes through Marlborough – Pewsey etc.
- Q. I know it's a hard task. Has the council bid to the government to change the council tax system? Many very well off people aren't paying as much as they should.**
- DT Yes. We want to change the council tax to the higher bands. It's a national issue and we are lobbying hard.
- Q. Kennet had huge reserves. What does Wiltshire Council have?**
- JSc Our reserves are £12 million, which is the 4<sup>th</sup> lowest in the country.
- Q. There was a lot of concern about the rising cost of council pensions. What's the situation?**
- DT There is less money to invest as we have less staff. We manage a £1.8 billion scheme. It's a national scheme.
- Q. Where will the Stonehenge Tunnel money come from? You are happy with the broadband success, but that isn't the case in Potterne. There is no chance of that until 2017.**
- DT We are involved in the public consultation, but we are not putting any money in. Highways England will be paying for the Stonehenge tunnel.  
JT 70,000 homes have high speed broadband which wouldn't have been the case without the investment from the council. We can also help through grants with other schemes. In the rural areas we are looking at wireless solutions as copper cable slows the speed down.  
We have been lobbying the government hard. We have told them we need

that, it's very important in a rural county. More people are signing up for broadband in the areas we have helped fund than in the commercially provided areas. This means we are able to reinvest more than £2million locally. It's also an open network, so people can use any service provider. We have a good reputation for delivering this programme. And the money we are now getting back will pay for the harder to reach areas. The problem in some rural areas is the length of run from the cabinets – often these are too long to guarantee a good broadband speed so we have in some areas to look at innovative 4G wireless solutions which will take time.

**Q. What is the future of community area partnerships funding?**

DT We no longer fund them, but the area boards can allocate funding for capital initiatives that the partnerships are leading on.

**Q. What inflation rate have we used for 16/17?**

MH Various - construction industry, pay, fuel etc. Appendix 1d of our budget papers shows this.

**Q. What services are we sharing with other councils?**

DT We are talking to Swindon and BANES.  
JT South Gloucestershire and Swindon worked with us for broadband  
JSc Internal audit and children's services are shared across the south west. Working with the police and fire to deliver big savings in IT and asset management.

**Q. I think we should continue to support the voluntary sector.**

JSc We have had to work with them to reduce their grant by 10% last year and this year. We are working with them to help them reduce their running costs. We would not be the same county without volunteers.  
JT The CAB is moving into our health and wellbeing centre in Salisbury. We are helping them become more efficient and they are an example to other charities across the county.

**Q. How much can we tease out about the costs for care?**

DT We keep a very close eye on all of our costs. And they are all in our budget book.  
JSc It's important to reiterate that we don't do short visits. We put time and effort in to help people back on their feet and become more independent. I think we do this really well, but it does put a pressure on the budget. We are very clear with our home care providers that the employees get paid for the time they travel and there are no zero hour contracts. They are very important and really do such a valuable job. We don't keep people in hospital. The numbers are extremely low in Wiltshire. In Wiltshire we call it "help to live at home" and we work across all agencies to make sure that once a person comes back from hospital everything is in place to help them stay in their home.

**Q. Is the council considering amalgamating councillors?**

- DT We used to have 252 councillors, now we are down to 98. We have really reduced the number.
- SW It is not our decision to make. It will probably be reviewed after 2017. The government wants each councillor to represent roughly the same number of people. So it isn't simple. Everyone's vote should be equal. We will be reviewing certain areas, especially in the military areas. We are also reviewing the town and parish council boundaries.
- Q. When setting council tax bands, not everyone who lives in a big house has lots of money. Can we be assured Ringway will sort the backlog of road repairs?**
- PW The council is resurfacing more roads than ever. The small patching work will transfer to Ringway. We are looking forward to an improvement, especially in customer response times.
- JSc The asset rich/revenue poor issue is big in Wiltshire and we are keeping an eye on it.
- Q. The A342/A345 corridor will take the brunt of the military basing. What are we doing about the council tax inside the wire?**
- MH We get around 81% back at the moment - so they do pay council tax.
- JSc There are around 4,000 army personnel coming to Wiltshire – around 2,500 will live behind the wire.

### Chippenham budget meeting

3 February 2016

- Q. You mentioned the number of retired residents...what percentage of people who are retired continue to pay the council? Also, devolution...is this being done to save you money or the taxpayer?**
- A. We estimate that the number of self-funders is around 33% of the population. We are seeking to do deals on devolution, and these deals will be different and unique to each area. We have to find a deal that is acceptable to each town or parish council and also acceptable to Wiltshire Council.
- Q. Sharing of public buildings....why do staff still use the Angel Hotel for meetings when you still have a lease on Bewley House, which is expensive?**
- A. We do have a long term lease on Bewley House but this is very restrictive and there is very little we can use it for. We will look into use of rooms at the Angel Hotel as this should not be happening.

*Following some background research it is confirmed that no Wiltshire Council staff have been using the Angel Hotel for meetings.*

- Q. You say that being unitary has saved money, but how much of that money would have been saved anyway?**

A. We have closed many buildings and this has saved money. £20m in revenue has been saved each year in recurring charges and £30m+ in capital receipts. £85m of property has been released and we have gone from more than 90 offices to three main hubs. We are also saving money on the maintenance of these buildings.

**Q. The Range is not the first time that a developer has decided not to go ahead with a development in Wiltshire and this seems to be down to the planning department. I understand there needs to be efficiencies but the planning department does not seem to be working effectively and so developers are going elsewhere.**

A. The performance of the planning department has improved. We have a target to deliver affordable housing and we are achieving this target. Our core strategy looked at employment sites which have been very successful. We have got employers wishing to come to Wiltshire but sometimes we find that we do not have the skills they need. We need the skills to attract the employers to the sites that are allocated. Sometimes developers do not want to move forward too quickly for many reasons and this is very restrictive for us.

**Q. What are your reserves like?**

A. Our reserves are £12 million, which is the 4<sup>th</sup> lowest in the country.

**Q. Cutting down levels of street lighting – is that going to be a policy for the future?**

A. We have not taken out street lighting at any dangerous junctions or anywhere like that. There has been phenomenal acceptance from the people of Wiltshire on this, and we commend the people of Wiltshire for this. A lot of people have said that they want lights turned off, as they like the darker nights. Clearly it can't be done everywhere but we are looking into where it would be appropriate to do so. We are speaking to some of the larger villages about doing this there.

#### **Trowbridge budget meeting**

**4 February 2016**

**Q. Military rebasing plans – who contributes towards local services – the council or the MOD?**

JSc The majority of money for infrastructure comes from the MOD – there are nearly 1,200 houses being built and there will be a further 2,500 servicemen within the wire – this represents an enormous investment. Where it costs Wiltshire Council is the time of a team to ensure that all the right facilities are in place. We do this by working through the Military Civilian Partnership programme – it's a big piece of work but remember that almost 7,000 extra people coming to Wiltshire will be a big boost to the local economy.

We will benefit from increased Council Tax although we only receive about 81% for married quarters. We will have a large reservoir of people wanting jobs. We already know that Wiltshire is the second most popular place for army veterans to settle

which brings with it a real boost to the economy, they are staying longer and putting down roots which is a good thing.

**Q. Capital projects – are they all necessary at this time – such as the traffic light scheme in Melksham which is costing £1 million?**

DT Yes capital investment is important but we will be reducing the programme.

PW It's not £1 million for just traffic lights – it's to resolve the pinch point on the A350 after the new Asda was opened – we are going to sequence the lights all the way to the motorway to make sure traffic flows much better as part of our long term plans to upgrade the A350 which is a major road connecting the midlands with the channel ports. This is such an important corridor that our businesses want and need.

JSc The Highways agency won't let us upgrade anymore of the A350 until they have undertaken improvements to junction 17 on the M4.

**Q. Planning process – is there any way to force developers to bring forward their plans?**

TS Unfortunately, there are developers who have no intention of developing their land – they are basically speculators who are waiting to sell and parcel up their holdings when they feel the time is ripe. There is little we can do to stop this – however, we have for the last 10 years hit all our targets on developing land and encouraging house building and affordable housing provision – our core strategy is adopted but there have been issues in the building industry over a lack of skilled tradesmen and in some areas a lack or shortage of key building materials such as concrete blocks many of which have had to be brought in from Ashford in Kent. There are other reasons as well – we know in Chippenham of a number of developments where the owner gets more money if he builds after 2017 so not surprisingly he isn't going to start this year.

JSc It's upsetting for communities to have to wait – there is all this anxiety around development which in the case say of Paxcroft Mead was before things happened but now people are used to the new environment – so delaying development once it's agreed causes unnecessary anxiety.

**Q. Persimmon homes – Hilperton Gap – understand they have now pulled out – what are your thoughts on this?**

TS House builders have targets – they all look for areas with best margins and they don't like often to develop all their land with the same house builder so it's possible they are looking to parcel up their land and sell off to other house builders – I don't know this but it could be the case.

**Q. In your opinion would this slow up development in this area?**

TS Not necessarily- it could actually speed things up.

**Q. This isn't a question but could I compliment you on unitary status – and the area boards set up – it works really well.**

DT Thank you – I recently attended a County Councils Network event and my view is that most of the time it's the counties blaming the districts and the districts blaming the counties – so much wasted energy – the Government should force unitary. The money to be saved would be enormous.

**Q. Local searches – they seem to take too long – has this been addressed?**

JSc We are aware of the problems and we are taking appropriate action.

TS We are moving digitalising the records and we need to be clearer about our charging policy. We always prioritise those who have a mortgage offer waiting.

**Q. Developing more volunteers?**

DT We have a large project in Salisbury to delegate lots of amenity type services to the City Council. We have a similar project in Calne. If there is anything in particular you are thinking of taking on then please contact us and we will listen. We have for example got global insurance for volunteers which might help you.

JSc We have one of the highest percentage of volunteers in Wiltshire doing fantastic jobs keeping services going that we on our own could not - the library service is an example of this – we have some 760 volunteers helping us running libraries that frankly would have closed without this support. We also have volunteers helping in communities with Broadband training – IT literate helpers who are engaging with their community to help people become more confident using IT – we also have a large number of Rights of Way volunteers. All services need them – we are just looking at how best we can support them.

JT We have volunteers litter picking – we provide litter picking kits – we take care of the insurance etc – we also have volunteer flood watch as well as in Bradford on Avon there is volunteer lorry watch. In our smaller libraries we have reading clubs, homework clubs, toddler groups – these are all staffed by volunteers.

PW There is a voluntary group in Chippenham called the Off the Ground group which has collected over 7 tons of rubbish from around the area. We also have our Wiltshire App for reporting potholes etc. These reporters are our eyes and ears – means we don't have to spend resources looking for these things – the public report them.

JSc There are really two types of council – one that just says we need to slash and cut services because they have no money and the other type which looks for innovative solutions that says we will keep services although we might have to do them differently – we are always looking at how to do services differently not just reduce or close them.

**Q. Broadband – when is it coming to Upper Westwood?**

JT There is an excellent on line website where you can put in your postcode and it tells you when superfast broadband is going to be available. Wiltshire is part of a national programme we have put in £16 million – it's allowed us to connect up 70,000 homes which otherwise wouldn't have got superfast connection. Take up rates are also higher than the average so we have managed to plough back an extra £2 million into



the programme. Around 94% of Wiltshire homes are covered. The rest are more difficult often because houses are so far away from the BT cabinets that a wireless solution might be needed. Did you know you can apply for a £350 voucher towards a wireless solution if you are in those areas struggling and you have a speed below 2mbs.

**Q Preventative maintenance on our roads?**

PW Last year we resurfaced more miles than we have ever done and we are increasing this again this year – however the wet weather has caused problems particularly the water run-off from farmers’ fields. We have a new contractor starting in April and we are moving to new systems of operating to be more intelligent with what we do – so for example gully emptying – there are 80,000 gullies in Wiltshire which we empty once a year. However, we know that 60% don’t need doing at all. It’s using GPS to apply the money in a more effective means.

JSc As you know I come from a farming background – farming methods and equipment have changed radically over the last 20 years – ditches are no longer cleared by hand but by machine and this isn’t as good. We can charge farmers if ditches become blocked and they are not kept clean, but we prefer to persuade rather than threaten them to cooperate.

**Q Are farmers liable for road damage due to their large machinery digging up the verges?**

JSc Unfortunately, the farmers are not liable in law so we have to rely on talking to them. We also suffer from the trend for ever bigger farm tractors and machinery which does damage road verges – if this happens than we rely on local knowledge and parish councillors to have a word.

**Salisbury budget meeting**

**10<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**Q. I want to ask a question about income generation and whether you might be able to raise more money this way from things like leisure charges or parking?**

DT The fees and charges income has been included in the figures shown on the slides – in some services such as planning the fees are set by government so we don’t have any lee way.

JT In leisure services we have substantially improved our offer and closed the gap between expenditure and income – the gap used to be £2.5 million now it’s closer to £0.5 million. New state of art fitness centres are being implemented. We have re-designated our leisure centres as Health and Wellbeing centres which may allow us to draw on Public Health funding and a reduction in the NNDR (business rates) we pay. However, we all know that swimming pools always need a subsidy -we try to overcome this by generating income elsewhere in leisure.

**Q. Why isn’t the council raising money by applying a flood levy for protection works for those communities affected?**

JS You are probably comparing us with Somerset where they have introduced a separate flood levy – however, this was allowed in Somerset because the flooding affected a large geographical area which actually saw about 140 properties flooded, whereas in Wiltshire we had close to 500 but spread out in small pockets across the whole county.

We have invested a further £250k in making sure gully and drainage ditches are cleared. In Salisbury we know there is a potential problem – the last huge flood was 1915 and they say these are a 1 in 100 year events so we are due one – so we are working closely with the Environment Agency to be ready.

MH Just to clarify – Somerset could raise a levy because the Secretary of State agreed this – wasn't offered to us in Wiltshire.

**Q. What happens when ground water flows from one parish upstream as a result of flood alleviation but affects a Parish downstream?**

JS We are acutely aware of this – every £1 we invest in flood prevention draws down £3 from the Environment Agency. But you do raise a valid point – allowing the water to flow downstream to protect one area sometimes means that another area is flooded – so we need to closely monitor schemes like this – one we put in Malmesbury has taken a year of data to work out that it's going to be a success.

**Q. I am under the impression that regular road sweeping has now stopped and you have to complain before anything is done. If you aren't going to do it who will?**

DT Some things unfortunately we can't do as often as we would like to – we have to work within our budget.

PW We sweep 21 town centres every morning but in outlying areas we now operate a reactive service – please use the APP when contacting us as a phone call costs us £5.10 to process where as the APP costs £0.37p.

You are right we have reduced road sweeping to save money. In my own village I do my own area outside my property that gets heavily covered in leaves – we appreciate all the volunteers and local people who assist with this.

**Q. So I sweep up the leaves but what do I do with it?**

PW I put it in my compost bin or green bin. It's about the community having to look after themselves more – if the road is dangerous then of course that is a different matter.

JT I live in Sherston and the parish have decided to put up their precept to pay for 2 people to act as village wardens to pick litter and keep the place tidy. Contact your parish to see if they might be interested in something similar.

DT We are currently finalising a deal with Salisbury City Council to take over a number of assets and services which should give control back to local people.

**Q. Why do you continue to keep the Park and Ride open when it plainly can't make any money?**

DT The park and ride was built with the help of Government money which means we can't stop operating it or the money has to go back. It also means we are only allowed to charge a certain amount for the service rather than try and compete directly with commercial services. Without it though, the city centre would grind to a halt with traffic.

JT There are a lot of myths about the Park and Ride - originally it was designed so that car parking charges in the centre would increase to push commuters etc on to the Park and Rides – however, when this was mooted it was thrown out. The Park and Ride does help cut pollution in the city – there are certain roundabouts close to capacity now that without the Park and Ride would be grid locked. If you want to see the data come and see us and sit down with us – we are a car loving society and have a very high car ownership in the county although it is lowest in the City – so we must be having an effect.

**Q. A303 litter along the lay-by at long barrow it's a disgrace – what can you do about it?**

PW I agree 100% it is a disgrace – the A350, A36, A303 they are all a disgrace but they are not our responsibility – as main roads they are controlled by the Highways Agency now Highways England and they seem to have withdrawn this service. We did do an extra litter pick last year but it cost us £120k – we are lobbying government to try and get them to insist that all take away cartoons and containers are branded with the business owner so we can trace where the litter comes from – we already do this with the likes of McDonalds who have been very helpful and if the litter is within a certain radius of their outlet they are asked to remove it – which they do. Really what we need to do is education our young people in particular not to throw it away in the first place.

**Q. What are our reserves and could we use some of this and have you recovered all your investments in the Iceland Bank?**

DT Yes we have now recovered all but 2% of the money we invested.

MH Our reserves are around £12 million – 4<sup>th</sup> lowest level in the country.

**Q. What about our business rates – just heard the chancellor say we can use 100% of what we collect?**

DT NNDR we collect and only get back 32% as the rest is used by Government to fund those poorer areas where the economy isn't so strong. If we had it all back then we wouldn't need any Government grant at all – each area would be self financing.

MH I am on a working group reporting back to Government on how to overcome the problem of areas that cannot raise enough money from their NNDR – it's a very complex system that despite what the chancellor says won't get fixed - an example was Scunthorpe who raise £50 million in NNDR but get back £90 million from the Government – this has to come from other areas.

DT Think if the council was like Aberdeen – great NNDR when the oil industry booming but now? So be careful what you wish for.

**Q. What provision is there for remote rural communities where they are being asked to take on more but they don't really have any assets?**

JT It's all about a two way conversation with parish councils – some are considering running their leisure centre, car park, toilets etc. We aren't talking about communities running services for older or vulnerable people – we concentrate on these but if residents want more local services they can ask their parish council to raise its precept to pay for this. Or, if it's appropriate you could go to your local area board to request funding.

**Q. Some of our local roads haven't been repaired for 35 years – what are you doing about this?**

PW Yes you could be right – we prioritise repairs based on need – that doesn't mean we treat rural roads differently – we treat them all the same but based on their condition, safety, grip level etc. We have been dealing with a large backlog and have put in a lot of extra resources to the highway network – will take us another 6 years to remove the backlog entirely.

JT We have to concentrate on higher speed roads where an accident because of the road condition would be more serious

**Q. You have just resurfaced a section of road in Alderbury but the contractor has left a large manhole empty with just a cone around it – when are you going to get this fixed – I have reported it?**

PW Please give me your email address I will make sure someone contacts you and gets it sorted.

**Q. Your figures you quoted of £1700 per week for looked after children seem excessive – can you justify this?**

CG We try and ensure that we look after as many children who need foster care or complex support within Wiltshire but sometimes because of highly complex needs we have to send them to a specialist unit whose costs are as you say very substantial.

Some children require a number of carers 24/7. The number of children that we look after is relatively low compared to other Local Authorities and we do invest in preventative services.

**Q. We all know we are using volunteers more and more – what are you doing to engage with volunteers?**

JT We are doing several things – we have a data base that allows volunteers to choose areas they want to work in, we support and train our volunteers in libraries for example as well as our permanent staff – we treat them no differently – we are encouraging Link schemes as we look at bus services. In Wiltshire nearly 50% of all bus services are subsidised in some way – much more than in other rural counties – but this is just not sustainable – we need more volunteers. We have an ageing population but they are a huge resource we should be tapping in to.

**Q. Can you assure us that Ringway will provide a better job of the roads than the Balfour Beatty experience – that wasn't one of your best decisions?**

PW In answer to your question – yes we are confident we will get a better service.

**Code:**

JSc	Jane Scott
JS	Jonathon Seed
DT	Dick Tonge
JT	John Thomson
TS	Toby Sturgis
PW	Philip Whitehead
LM	Laura Mayes
SW	Stuart Wheeler
CG	Carolyn Godfrey
MH	Michael Hudson