

Leader's speech – Budget – 25 February 2014

Last year, two months after the local elections, we published our business plan that set out our focus and what we planned to deliver in the next four years.

Our vision; to create stronger and more resilient communities – agreed when we became a unitary council in 2009 – remains at the heart of everything we do.

We will continue to prioritise those who are most vulnerable and we will do all we can to continue to boost the local economy, and working with local people and organisations we will encourage and support our communities to do even more for themselves.

I am confident that next year's budget for 2014/15 will help us to deliver this vision and our key priorities.

Since publishing the business plan, we have not stood still – the pace of change, I believe, reflects Wiltshire Council as a dynamic organisation that is transforming how it works and how it gets things done.

Working with others – our key partners, businesses and local communities – we have made good headway to deliver the twelve actions that we set out in the plan. By working together we are becoming more efficient and the services we provide to the people of Wiltshire are continuing to improve.

We know that we have to continue to work differently as the situation gets tougher and there are no signs of improvement in the funding for local public services for at least the next four years.

Difficult decisions will need to be made as funding continues to reduce and the pressure for our services continues to increase - particularly for vulnerable adults and children.

We realise that there are few easy options available; but, by working together with communities and partners we can make better use of our resources and save money to lessen the impact on vital front line services.

Last year we saw huge changes in the National Health Service, including public health being integrated into the council and the establishment of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The role of the board is to look at how healthy Wiltshire's population is, and how - by working together – we can provide the best services for health and social care.

Although we are already one of the healthiest counties in the country – we still face a number of challenges and we cannot be complacent. The average life expectancy in Wiltshire is well above the national average, for the first time since records began, men in Wiltshire can now expect to live to an average of 80 years.

This ageing population has needs and conditions that are associated with older people, such as dementia. We need to work together with our local communities and health providers to make sure that we can deliver the level of support that they will need. We also want to increase the focus on prevention so we can tackle and prevent ill health for everyone. By focusing on prevention we can encourage people to be more active and healthy.

We will also look at how we support people's independence and how we can help people stay in their homes and local community for longer, which we know is their preferred option.

And, we will continue to keep people safe from avoidable harm; protecting and safeguarding those who are most vulnerable.

The government recently mandated all health and wellbeing boards to submit a Better Care Plan. The plan has to set out the vision for how we integrate health and social care services work and deliver better and more local services in our communities and will be aligned to the allocation of funding.

The funding is not new money - it is money previously used for the provision of health and social care. It will be allocated based on the plans and the actions that demonstrate how we will drive change and provide a different approach to care provision.

Currently, around £800 million is spent on health and social care in Wiltshire.

The Better Care fund could provide up to £27 million for the county for the integration of health and social care services. Working with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) we will need to invest additional resources in 2014/15 so that we can deliver our vision to provide care as close to home as possible – with home always as the first option.

It is vital that we protect social care services and that we are able to support people who are discharged from hospital and provide the services that are needed in their communities.

These services will be 24/7 and there is a need to establish a single approach to sharing information between professionals in health and social care to ensure there is one single assessment and a lead professional in each individual case.

We will hear the minister's views on our better care plan in the spring.

Working differently with our partners has been on the agenda ever since the cuts in funding from central government impacted on the public sector. We know we have to look at how we can share resources and adopt a more innovative approach to delivering vital services. Last year we made a lot of progress.

As I'm sure you are aware we now share our Monkton Park offices with Wiltshire police and these offices are being modernised to reflect our joint needs and provide additional space for other council services.

We have also delivered a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub – or MASH – as some of you may be more familiar with that term – here, in County Hall, that is housing all public sector agencies to address key safeguarding issues and to allow speedy access and sharing of key information that is needed to protect those who most need our help.

The newly refurbished County Hall has created a vibrant, busy and active community space and a state-of-the-art library that attracts all ages and a wide-range of events. It also provides a modern fit-for-purpose working environment for our staff and members.

Our transformation programme continues to streamline and make better use of the buildings we inherited when we became a unitary council in 2009. We are on target to reduce from 95 office buildings to 3 main hub offices, and we will sell assets worth £75 million in the next two years. We have already sold 12 buildings and surrendered leases on 18 others.

Currently, we have 16 buildings on the market and 27 more buildings will be released for sale when the three main hubs are complete. This not only means we are delivering savings of £5 million each year on running costs, but it has also provided us with the opportunity to do things differently in the way we work and how we do business.

Our hub environments should not be underestimated; the recent peer review said we were radical, transformational and a modern organisation that was setting a benchmark for others.

Last year we continued to work with our local communities; particularly looking at the delivery of local services and assessing what they want, in the location they say works best for them, and how they will get involved in the provision of these services.

The first campus will open in Corsham this summer and will be a focus for the local community providing public and voluntary services and space for a wide-range of activities and local events.

Development is also underway for campuses in Salisbury and Melksham which plan to open next year. Other campuses across the county are at various stages of development or public consultation but as you are aware the plan is to have a campus, if the community wants one, in every community area.

Our county will continue to change and develop over the next four years.

The Army Rebasing programme announced in March last year will see more than 4,000 army personnel and their families relocate to this county over the next five years.

Working with the MoD we are ensuring these moves are as smooth and successful as possible and that we have the right level of services and infrastructure in place. Consultation and awareness is vital, particularly within the local communities directly affected by the rebasing plans. The consultation process on the master plan started last week.

Working with these communities, we will maximise the economic opportunities the rebasing plans will bring. We are proud of our military links and the fact that this county will be home to largest Army base in the country and that already 12 per cent of our population is made up of service veterans.

For those who choose to leave the armed forces and remain in this county - we welcome them and we will support them as they make the transition into civilian life and suitable occupations. Their skills should not be underestimated and the training, work ethic and leadership abilities that they have make them a real asset to our communities.

Following Lord Heseltine's review on local economic growth two years ago, the government asked all Local Enterprise Partnerships - or LEP - to develop a five year Strategic Economic Plan detailing how we will grow our local economies between now and 2020.

This plan will be used to allocate Swindon and Wiltshire's share of the government's Single Local Growth Fund, which is a new £2 billion annual funding stream. The amount awarded to each LEP will be based on the strength of its plan. We are currently working to ensure that our plan is innovative, ambitious and competitive and robust enough to secure funding.

Job creation and achieving sustainable and appropriate growth within our county is at the heart of the draft Wiltshire Core Strategy – which outlines where growth could take place in Wiltshire by 2026.

The strategy, which has been shaped through local public consultation, is currently with a government inspector. Whilst other local authorities have had their core strategies dismissed, we have only been asked to provide more information around increasing our housing figures, as part of the government's growth agenda. Providing this information is another step in this important and extremely complex process.

As I mentioned earlier, the pace of delivery is both fast and dynamic reflecting national and local demands and the need for change.

Last September we invited a peer review team to assess how we were doing and to receive feedback on our focus for Wiltshire. I'm a great believer that it's always a good thing for others to assess how you are doing and where you can do things better.

The reviewers, made up of a senior team including a chief executive, leader and the LGA, spent a week researching, enquiring and watching what we do and their overall view was that 'Wiltshire Council is in a good place and it is going in the right direction'.

In proposing next year's budget we have once again had to manage considerable challenges. Like all local authorities, we continue to face financial pressures with our funding from central government reducing, and the demands for services increasing; including those services that have been essential during the recent adverse weather.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise and thank our local communities and staff - not just from the council, but our partners too - who have worked tirelessly to try and combat the impact of the recent extreme rainfall.

I would like to acknowledge the support that has been provided to local communities following the damaging flooding that has occurred. I know it's been a difficult few months and I have visited many parts of Wiltshire that have been affected including Aldbourne where I witnessed the effects first hand. There's no doubt that the impact of the relentless rain has been hard for many people.

In the last four years we have saved more than £90 million and we know that becoming a unitary council helped us to achieve this. Looking ahead, the next four years will undoubtedly continue to be challenging and we will need to find £120 million if we are to continue to deliver our key priorities.

Funding from central government will be cut by £9.5 million next year and we know that the demand on services plus inflation costs is more than £16 million. This meant we had to make some tough choices before proposing any investments as we needed to find £25.5 million. We have to continually look at how services can best be provided for the future.

An example of where we need to review how we do things differently is our current youth activities provision across Wiltshire.

We know that only a minority of young people currently use the youth services that we provide. Their preference is often to use facilities and activities provided by the community, voluntary and private sectors.

By asking young people what activities and facilities they would like in their local communities we can look at future provision. The needs of young people today are very different from the provision we put in place ten years ago.

We want more young people to access services and we welcome their views on the four options for future provision. We currently spend more than £3.4 million on youth services and we are proposing to save £500,000. This means that we will still be spending £2.9 million on youth services and we will not, like many other local authorities be stopping this provision.

Consultation is currently underway and if the option to deliver community led youth services is seen as the most appropriate, we will look at devolving funding and decisions for youth activities and service provision locally through our area boards. Many boards already deliver an exemplary youth service facilitating and supporting a huge range of activities and initiatives to engage young people.

Over the next few years we will inevitably have to make more tough choices if we are to deliver our priorities. This year we are proposing to continue to invest in essential frontline services, and as such we plan to spend an additional £18 million in priority areas as set out in our business plan.

Feedback from more than 6,000 residents in our What Matters to You survey and focus groups showed people want more spent on roads, older people and adult social care, and affordable housing – and we are putting significant investment into all three of these areas.

We will continue to maintain our roads and pavements and we will invest an additional £52 million over the next six years which means we will spend a total of £21 million a year to improve the 2,765 miles of road in Wiltshire that we are responsible for. We have already begun working with communities through the area boards to identify those stretches of roads and pavements that they consider to be a local priority.

Wiltshire's growing population of elderly and vulnerable adults means there is a corresponding growing demand for social care – but also a changing pattern of care.

We are committed to providing care for our elderly and vulnerable people within their own homes wherever possible, helping them to continue to lead safe and better quality lives in surroundings where they feel most comfortable. To support that, we are investing a further £3.6 million in our adult frontline care.

To meet the demand in the number of children needing our care we will invest more than £5 million to accommodate this growing need. We will also continue to provide the essential short breaks scheme for children with disabilities and their families.

This is a nationally recognised scheme which is held in high regard by local parents and children. We intend to maintain our investment of £1 million, reflecting our priority to support those who are most vulnerable in our local communities.

Over the next four years, we will invest £44.9 million in modernising our council housing, plus a further £2 million a year will help towards the provision of much needed affordable housing. £16 million pounds of investment is already starting to improve broadband speeds across Wiltshire.

As I mentioned before, the first campus will open this summer in Corsham, plus a further six are due for completion by end of 2016 – this equates to an investment of £54.5million over the next 4 years.

In recognition of the current economic climate and the impact that this continues to have on so many households, I am proposing that for the fourth year in a row we will not be increasing the council tax. This means that the average household has saved around £382.00 and that as one of the largest councils in the country we are pleased to be able to keep council tax level as low as possible by working differently and innovatively to deliver our vital front line services.

I mentioned earlier the impact of the adverse weather that has blighted the county since before Christmas. I am proposing a re-alignment of £0.5 million each year for the next four years from the highways capital budget into flood prevention and protection reflecting the need to support and work with those local communities that have been most affected.

This means that £1 million will be allocated to help protect these communities which is in addition to any government announcement and funding streams allocated for flooding.

I am also proposing that the council approves a transfer of £0.6 million from its transformation reserve to fund work on developing a single shared information system for Wiltshire with our partners in health.

This funding forms part of the Better Care Plan submission to central government and Wiltshire's Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) will allocate with £0.5 million.

The new system will be used to drive out inefficiencies and improve preventative work with the delivery of a more responsive service that will meet the needs of local residents; particularly those who are most vulnerable, by asking questions just once – it is well known that people find it incredibly frustrating; particularly when they are unwell, to have to repeat again and again the same information.

I would like to say a special thank you to the finance team, for the production of this year's budget and all the supporting papers. I would also like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to the three corporate directors and my cabinet for all their hard work last year and for their support in delivering a robust budget that builds on our innovative approach and our track record of success.

It will help us to achieve the vision and continue to deliver our key priorities and make Wiltshire a better place to live and work in and visit.