

**Councillor Jane Scott, Leader Wiltshire Council**

**Budget speech – 26 February 2015**

**“A budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations”.**

I recently came across this quote from the current United States Secretary of the Treasury; Jacob Lew.

I am passionate that we stay true to our values and priorities – even though we have to deliver substantial savings and make some tough decisions. We need to do what we believe is right for the people of Wiltshire.

This is not an easy task.

I want to set out the budget process and focus on the impact of the decisions that we – as a council – will make today and what this will mean to the people and communities that we represent.

We are a big and complex business that spends £900 million each year on more than 350 services. The changing demographics, such as people living longer, coupled with inflation and the cuts in funding from central government - mean that we have to find even more savings.

We have made no secret of this situation.

Last year we received £119 million from central Government – this year we will get £103.8 million. This cut of more than £15 million, combined with the rise in demand for some of our key front line services and inflation costs, means we need to find a further £30 million of savings this coming financial year.

We are good at saving money - we are innovative in the way we do things.

Last year we saved £25.5 million - this was as a result of reviewing our services and looking at how we deliver these more efficiently. We also looked at where it made sense to share resources with our public sector partners; particularly Wiltshire police.

The reality of having to make savings will continue - for at least the next few years.

We know that local government will continue to be targeted by central government in the bid to reduce the national debt.

Despite these cuts - we remain absolutely committed to our three main priorities;

We will protect those who are most vulnerable in our communities – and, we will protect the money allocated to both our children and adult social care services.

We will do all we can to boost the local economy by creating new jobs and safeguarding existing jobs; with particular emphasis on higher value jobs, and we will make sure that by working with schools and further and higher education, we can ensure we have a skilled workforce .

And, we will support and empower local communities to do more for themselves. We need to do all we can to help make them stronger and more resilient so that they are able to cope with and manage the pressures and problems that they face.

We are proud to be a council that promotes openness and transparency. The views of our local residents and communities are extremely useful and influential in helping us to make the tough choices required.

Myself and the cabinet recently invited local residents to attend a number of public meetings where we presented the challenges we face and discussed where we could make £30 million savings.

More than 350 people attended these meetings and we weren't just there to be seen to be listening - we were genuinely listening, and we were impressed with what we heard.

As you would expect there was some criticism of the council – but there was also constructive feedback, and a real sense that people understood the difficult financial situation that we are in.

I have stressed that one of the main priorities is to protect those who are most vulnerable and, of course we considered whether we should increase council tax this year.

Whilst this may be acceptable to some, it would be an additional pressure on many households - particularly those on low or fixed incomes.

Just recently, the Local Government Information Unit published findings that more people are currently in debt on their council tax payments, than they are on their credit card payments.

At the public meetings only two people, out of 350, raised the idea of increasing the council tax. We believe, therefore, that any increase has to be sustainable for future years and would definitely have an adverse effect on those who most need our support.

We should be proud that we have not increased council tax for the past five years and that throughout this time we have managed to sustain the delivery of key front line services. If we had increased by 1.9 per cent each year since 2010, the average band D property, which currently pays £1,222 would now be paying £1,344. This almost a hundred and twenty two pounds more, before you add on the police, fire and parish increases.

This means that in the last five years Wiltshire residents have had one of the lowest national increases in council tax. Compare this to the average rate of inflation - over the same period of time -this has increased by almost 19.5 per cent. We should be proud that the average household will be saving £212 this year and will have saved £708 over this period.

We therefore believe that the right option this year is to take the government grant so that we can continue to keep the council tax increase at zero per cent.

We want to continue with a low tax for all - but offer choice for some.

That is why one of our proposals is to charge for garden waste. We do recognise that some households will need to continue with the assisted collection service, which we will provide for those who need our support.

But - this year's budget is not all about finding savings – the signs that we are moving out of economic recession are becoming more visible. Here in Wiltshire we have less people unemployed, businesses are relocating to the county and others are starting-up, expanding and growing. We will be able to offer educational and job opportunities as the new University Technical College opens in Salisbury and work starts on the development of a science park at Porton this year.

We will continue to invest in the services that we know matter most to Wiltshire residents - and we will also invest into the areas that will save us money in the future.

As I have stated before – we have three clear priorities – these drive our vision, focus and where we allocate our resources.

We need to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable and we will protect the budget for children's services. We know that more children need safeguarding and more are in need of our support and care.

We have also protected our school improvement service, which we know is having a positive impact. Working together with schools - on the quality of education for many children - we have clear evidence of how effective this service is. We are, therefore, not reducing the support we provide for school improvement this year.

We recognise that saving money is important and necessary, but what's more important is that we make the best use of our resources to make sure that we protect, safeguard and improve the quality of life for all our residents.

I'm sure you will all agree that we cannot continue to have the situation that we saw in the acute hospitals this winter. Major incidents were declared in both the Royal United and Great Western hospitals as a result of the number of people requiring beds, care and treatment.

We have to continue to work closely with our health partners to improve care and to provide support so that we prevent unnecessary hospital admissions. We also need to assist people to leave hospital as soon as they are ready so that they can recover in their own home – which we know is their preferred option.

As you are all aware - people are living for longer – which is a good thing.

Currently in Wiltshire we have 15 per cent more older people than the UK average. Whilst this is an opportunity for us – as many older people are healthy and fit and willing to volunteer to support the delivery of our services and to do more in their local communities – it places a huge demand on both our social care and health services.

Last year the government mandated the newly established health and wellbeing boards to submit a Better Care Plan. I am pleased that Wiltshire's plan is one of the five that has been fast tracked by the government. It sets out how, by working with our health partners, we are integrating health and social care to deliver better and more local services.

Currently, around £800 million is spent each year on health and social care in the county. The Better Care fund will provide around £27 million for the county. Working with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) we launched a 100 day challenge. This required us gathering information in order to look at how we deliver improvements and take action to make a real difference.

Improvements in care for residents across the county are happening. Seven-day support for patients being discharged from hospital is now in place and people are being supported to remain at home or in their local community.

We are also establishing a single approach to sharing information between professionals to ensure there is one single assessment and people needing health and social care services will only have to answer personal questions once.

One thing is certain, it is difficult to know the level of spend, or the number of children and adults that may need our help in any one year – whilst we can estimate – we know that we have to respond and continue to protect those who are most vulnerable.

Wiltshire is changing and will continue to change.

Last month we approved the Core Strategy which positions the development and growth in Wiltshire up to 2026. The strategy sets out a housing requirement – imposed by the planning inspector. 42,000 homes in total will be allocated in Wiltshire. The strategy strives to strike a balance between driving economic growth and protecting the wonderful environment we have in our county.

Since 2006, almost 16,500 of the 42,000 homes have been built and there are commitments for around 20,300 more homes to be built by 2026. This figure is based on the extensive consultation with hundreds of organisations, businesses and residents. A further 5,400 homes will need to be allocated to meet the total requirement of the Core Strategy as set by the planning inspector. People are being consulted at this time on the preferred allocation of these additional homes.

We know that as part of this growth we need to provide more affordable homes as well as extra care and sheltered housing to meet the demand in the growth of older people. We will invest £45 million to deliver these, in partnership with developers, and we have also allocated £46 million to improve our council housing.

The Army basing programme will see more than 4,000 armed forces personnel, and their families relocating to Wiltshire by 2020. The first families will start to arrive next year.

Planning applications will be submitted soon for housing and the appropriate infrastructure in Ludgershall and Bulford. Working with the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation we want the development and relocation to be as smooth and as successful as possible. Local communities have been asked for their views and are being kept updated as the plans progress.

We are a military county and we will be home to the largest Army base in the country – this makes us unique and creates opportunities for both economic and community growth.

We need to invest to provide the right infrastructure to keep the economy in Wiltshire buoyant.

We are continuing to invest in Wiltshire's roads. We have allocated £84 million pounds to resurface roads over the next four years and £26 million will be spent on road maintenance - including filling potholes. We recognise how important this is to local people and the need to have the right infrastructure to keep our county moving and accessible.

£65 million has been allocated to deliver a number of major schemes. These include building the new world class Porton Science Park, which will be underway by the end of this year; dualing the A350 Bypass at Chippenham; delivering a major refurbishment of Chippenham's railway station, and improving the A429 at Malmesbury as part of the expansion of Dyson.

Last month a Growth Deal package of Government money of £11.5 million was unveiled for Wiltshire including Swindon. We received £8.5 million. This Growth Deal funding is in addition to the £129.3 million committed by the Government last July. As a result of this deal, the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership estimates 8,500 new jobs, 40 hectares of new employment land, and 8,000 new homes will be built. The deal also has the potential to generate up to £70 million pounds of public and private investment into the county.

This funding will deliver improvements on our roads at Junction 17 on the M4 Motorway and at the busy Yarnbrook junction near Trowbridge. The investment at Yarnbrook will unlock the development of 2,600 homes in Trowbridge.

The £8.5 million funding will also be used to develop a digital skills and business incubation centre in Corsham. This project will encourage innovative start-up businesses as part of the Digital Corsham project based at the Mansion House.

It is vital that we continue to do all that we can to keep Wiltshire's economy vibrant.

Working with local communities and doing all that we can to enable them to do more for themselves is becoming more and more critical. We know that our resources are reducing and that we have to be more discerning about where we allocate our money and staff.

The stronger our communities are, the more able they will be to resolve matters and take action and the less reliant they will be on public services. This means we can allocate our resource where it is most needed.

That is why we have allocated £66 million to provide community campuses and hubs across the county. These new campuses are rationalising buildings - often scattered around a community area in various states of disrepair and no longer fit for purpose - into a location that is more accessible, and will provide local communities with the range of services, facilities and activities that they need.

This is an ambitious programme and it's transforming how we work with local communities. Unlike other councils we have not closed any libraries or leisure centres and in some cases we are keeping these services open for longer hours to meet the needs in a local community and I think we should be proud of this achievement too.

Across the county we will look at possible campus and hub models to assess what's required and what can be delivered in each community area. We also recognise the importance of incorporating a campus as part of developing the town centres in Chippenham, Trowbridge and Warminster, and we are working with our partners to decide where co-location is the best option.

Working with our well established area boards we are devolving services and empowering local communities to make decisions that are right for them.



Last year we changed how we provide youth activities by devolving more than £440,000 to the area boards to work with local groups and community youth officers to fund activities and events that young people want.

We are monitoring the impact of this new approach to assess the level of engagement and take up, and I am pleased that the feedback we have received so far has been extremely positive.

We already know that the approach to assessing which highway works and road maintenance takes priority in a local area is a huge success. Communities can determine what they need and how they want their budget for these services allocated.

It makes sense for local people to influence and decide what's best for them and now that public health has been integrated back in to the council, we have been working with area boards to hold health fairs and health checks and we are encouraging the nomination of an older people's champion in each area to be the voice and coordinator of what older people need. Last year all our communities signed up to be dementia aware - recognising that dementia is a reality for many older people and their carers and families in Wiltshire.

This time last year – you may recall - we had been hard hit by inclement weather and many of our local communities suffered the impact of flooding. We invested more than a £1 million to help with flood prevention work and to support those areas most affected.

I am pleased to announce that we will continue to provide this funding this year as we know the devastating impact that flooding can have – although fingers crossed the adverse weather that we saw last year is not repeated.

We are a very efficient council...

We have taken every opportunity to review what we do and where we can do things better. We have streamlined our assets, our properties and the services we provide.

Working closely with our partners; particularly health and the police we are sharing resources and buildings to make savings and maximise the space and service offer in our three main hubs and new campus buildings.

We manage change and the challenges we face with a can-do approach and openness. A recent staff survey highlights that more than 90 per cent of staff are aware of the direction, vision and values of this council.

As I said at the start –

The budget is not just a set of numbers – it's a representation of our values and ambitions.

I believe we have stayed true to our values and ambitions.

We will continue to protect those who are most vulnerable,  
We will do all that we can to keep the local economy buoyant  
And, we will support our communities to become even stronger and more able to cope with the challenges and issues that they face.

In tough times we have to be innovative, forward thinking and focused.

This year's budget reflects the ideas, views and positive challenge of local residents, all of you - as elected members, our staff and our managers.

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; particularly Dick Tonge.

Their hard work has helped to deliver this robust, yet tough budget. It builds on our efficient and innovative approach to delivering services and how we work with our local communities to ensure that we make Wiltshire an even better place to live and work in and visit and most importantly it stays true to values and aspirations.