

Backbury Ward Report – February

It's been a busy return from Christmas. Over the last few months there have been drainage and flooding issues as we have had record levels of rainfall. This month is no different and I would ask that you contact me with any specific concerns or queries. For those of you that suffered damage as a result of Storm Henk, the Flood Recovery Framework has been triggered and additional help is available. If you would like further information on this then please do contact me.

A huge amount of time in cabinet has been spent on Council's Revenue Budget and the proposals contained within it. As you may be aware the minority Conservative administration (of which I am part and have the role of Cabinet Member for Economy, Growth and Strategic Housing) took charge of the Council in May 2023. Unfortunately significant overspends and unrealistic budgets in previous years had left the Council finances in a precarious state with little room to manoeuvre. Our challenge was to address a predicted annual deficit of some £28.8 million and we have done this by finding over £19.5 million in savings and efficiencies in conjunction with a 2% rise in the Adult Social Care Precept and a 2.99% rise in Core Council Tax. Whilst the increase in Council Tax is regrettable, a failure to do this now would have seen us on a very dangerous path indeed. You only need look across to Birmingham, where a 10% rise in Council Tax is being suggested, to see what happens where a Council fails to keep control of their finances. This budget also addresses the black hole in the Council's medium term financial forecast and will hopefully put us on the path to lower Council Tax rises in future years – something I am sure we can all agree is overdue. The challenge will now be delivering this budget without overspends and to help with this we have introduced new spending controls including a ban on all spending over £500 without senior sign off.

After the draft budget was published in December, Herefordshire Council received news of additional funding from the Government and we have allocated this to (Strategic Housing (£1 Million), Leominster HSAZ (£300k) and Support to the Voluntary Sector (£200k) amongst other things. A number of us also raised the vital role that Parish Council's and local communities play and I am pleased to say we won the argument for more funding to be spent in this area. This will see the appointment of a Funding / Grants Officer to support Town and Parish Councils (£56k), an increase in the Lengthsman Scheme (£250k), the creation of a new Public Rights of Way Scheme (£250k) and the creation of a new Drainage Grant Scheme (£450k). On a personal level I am delighted that this money will be spent at a local level and not with Balfour Beatty or other Council contractors.

Alongside the Revenue Budget we passed minor amendments to the Capital Budget which thanks to a re-scoping of priorities in December includes additional funding to establish a much needed inward investment service for the county. Employing for the first time an inward investment officer, and funding for an inward investment strategy and marketing programme. This will bring private investment and help secure our ambition for more better paid jobs to the county. The budget also commits both capital and revenue funds to establish new employment land across the county. Addressing a 10 year market failure, in creating the conditions for growth alongside £10 million for resurfacing our road network. The actions taken over the last few months have moved this Council on to a much firmer financial footing by refocusing its attention away from the much lamented schemes of the last four years and to getting back to delivering on residents priorities.

Finally for this Ward round up, there are two items on the horizon at Herefordshire which I think will be of particular interest to Councillors. Firstly the Roads / Bypass strategy which will be discussed by the Cabinet in the coming weeks and secondly the end of a tender process for a new highways maintenance framework. Whilst the latter may sounds dull it is one of the most significant changes

we have made as it will allow us to spend the additional highways funding outside of our Balfour Beatty contract as many of you have been clamouring for over a number of months / years.

I hope you find this update useful and I will update you further next month.

Locally to Fownhope, there are a couple of outstanding questions:

As to the hedge planting to the West of the village, I have been in contact with officers. As yet I have not got an answer that we will find acceptable. I am working to identify why the planting plan was changed. In truth though, my understanding from the Chair is that what is required is agreement to allow mixed native planting, irrespective of the why's and wherefores of how we have arrived at privet. This is ongoing and I'll update next month if not before.

There are other issues with the sites that have been raised. The enforcement officer is working with the developer to solve these.

Regarding the development of employment land and Model Farm in particular (referenced in budget above), I'm happy to discuss at the next meeting. There will be considerable investment into this over the coming years as a major employment site, near the M50 and as such is a key element of our drive for more better paid jobs in the county.

Lastly, I'm delighted that I managed to win the support of my colleague and cabinet member for roads to include resurfacing of the B4224 between the Woolhope Road and West End Stores when the traffic calming measures took place. I think with the pain of road closure to have the gain of a decent surface alongside the traffic calming measures was hugely important.

We are all aware of some issues – some with quality of finish, but certainly of poor communication.

I am working with the Parish Council and others to inform cabinet of the issues and welcome all feedback either directly to me or via the PC. Be clear what happened left many people unfairly inconvenienced and businesses suffering. These issues will be brought to BB in the strongest terms

I look forward to being with you at the next meeting.

Best,

Graham