

Borough Councillor's Annual Report 2015 / 2016

Budget and Council Tax

Bedford Borough councillors agreed the Council's budget for 2016/17 at its meeting on the 3rd February.

The budget was formulated in the midst of reduced resources and rising demand for services, particularly in relation to adult social care. As a result, officers estimated in October that the Council would be facing a £9.4m spending gap. The budget contains measures to meet the Council's spending pressures to ensure it sets a balanced budget in the coming year.

The budget includes an array of savings proposals totalling just under £1.3m which were the subject of 2 public consultations. It also increased the Council's Council Tax precept by 3.99% with a 1.99% rise as part of the Council's overall Council Tax levy and an extra 2% to cover adult social care costs; a new revenue raising mechanism granted to local authorities by the Government for the first time from April. The Borough will, therefore, effectively increase Council Tax by 3.99%, although this comes down to 3.94% when parish council precepts are factored in.

The Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner has also chosen to increase Bedfordshire Police's precept by 1.99%, as has the Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Authority. Taking into account each of the precepting authorities, the average Band D property Council Tax will be £1,634.44; an overall increase of £57.33 or 3.64%.

School Structural Review

Plans were approved in January for the Borough to move to a 2 tier education system following a public consultation and negotiations between the Council and schools over admissions arrangements.

Bedford Borough is currently one of a few local authority areas in England and Wales with a three-tier system. Despite strong Ofsted ratings, the Borough has consistently struggled when it comes to GCSE performance. This was evident in 2015 with 52% of pupils at the Borough's state schools achieving the key standard of 5 A* - C grades including English and maths, against a national average of 53.8% and the Statistical Neighbour average of 57.3% (i.e. a comparison with 10 authorities with similar characteristics to the Borough).

There are varying opinions as to why GCSE results are not commensurate with the Ofsted ratings. Some have pointed the finger of blame at the three-tier system, arguing that the extra transition is unnecessarily disruptive to a child's education and that it is harder to attract and retain teachers as the system is different from most areas.

The Council has, therefore, set aside £25.566m to make the necessary changes to school sites over the period 2016/17 – 2018/19. Of this sum, £17.064m will be spent on lower schools for 87 classrooms on 33 sites, while middle schools will receive £4.482m and upper schools £4.02m.

The scheme is part of a broader school investment programme, including £10.572m to continue the programme of removing temporary classrooms and funds for new school sites to be based at Wixams and Land North of Bromham Road (adjacent to the Western Bypass at Biddenham).

Most schools will be part of a 2 tier system from September 2017.

