

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Council Meeting - 26 February 2013

Alternative Budget Proposal – Liberal Democratic Group

Introduction

This budget proposal offers an alternative to the Executive's draft budget as discussed and amended at the meeting on 6 February 2013.

We recognise the tough times our community is facing and we fully support the Executives proposal to freeze council tax for next year. We have however three areas that we would like Councillors to consider:-

Open Spaces

We believe that the time has come to fundamentally review the existing policy on our hanging baskets and levels of maintenance on our open spaces. To this end:-

- We simply cannot support a further cut of £4,000 to the Hanging Baskets budget. This visual enhancement to the town should be protected. It is a penny pinching proposal and leads to an even greater sense of urban decay that we are experiencing through shop voids etc if we hang the baskets for a shorter period per annum. Our town centres need a sense of pride to be maintained.
- This same sense of pride underlies the proposal to spend £25,000 to identify a policy/strategy to introduce an organised grass cutting programme in 2014/2015 which gets the balance between competing demands of cost reductions, the perception of "tidiness" and the desire to encourage wildflowers and associated wildlife. A temporary (1 year) researcher would be employed at the DLO to identify suitable open spaces adjacent to our housing lands, open spaces associated with footpaths near highways and co-ordinate with Somerset County Council on how to establish the programme. It would be the intention to use the same sum in 2014/2015 to implement the actual cutting programme itself.

Tree Planting

We propose to invest an additional £10,000 towards achieving this.

Each year the Council has to fell a number of unsafe, diseased or dangerous trees in its parks, open spaces and roadsides. In order to ensure that the tree population of Taunton Deane is not depleted it is essential that new trees are planted to replace those which are lost and plant new ones in suitable locations.

An increasing number of tree species have become susceptible to tree diseases and we are losing many fine Horse Chestnuts, Cherries and Larch as well as the many Elms which have already gone. Ash disease will also soon be with us which is likely to kill hundreds of millions of this common tree across the country.

A recent ground breaking study in Torquay estimated the value of the tree cover in this relatively small Authority at £180million. This was carefully calculated using sound statistical analysis from examples around the world. The benefits which added to this overall value were the roles which trees play in reducing flooding by taking up water, reducing pollution from cars, absorbing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen, shelter and shade as well of course as providing the amenity value which so many people value and find inspirational.

The £10,000 will enable the Council to replant good sized trees itself and provide funds for volunteers to get involved as well.

Arts Development Grants

We believe that we should restore the £7,515 we withdrew from the below mentioned organisations last year. Taunton Deane needs to be identified with support for voluntary organisations that encourage participation in culture, particularly the creative arts at a time of deep recession and hard times falling on the community at large.

2012/13 Payments

Take Art	5,750.00
Action Track	1,955.00
SPAEDA	500.00
Somerset Art Works	1,380.00
Somerset Film	2,415.00
Total	12,000.00

These grants totalled £19,515 in 2011/12 and it is the intention to restore this. The sum included £4,000 to the Somerset Rural Music School.

The sums whilst appearing small, with the restoration of the original savings will make a large difference to the health of the organisations and send a strong signal that the Council is conscious of the importance of arts to the community

Funding

We believe that this should be comfortably funded from the General Fund Reserves

The financial summary of our Alternative Budget is as follows:-

	£	£
Reinstate Savings Plan – Hanging Baskets	4,000	
New Investment – Open Spaces	25,000	
Art Development Grants	7,515	
New Investment – Tree Planting	10,000	
	<u>46,515</u>	

Funded By:

General Fund Reserves	<u>46,515</u>	
		<u>46,515</u>

Conclusion

We present for your consideration an alternative budget to that presented by the Executive.

The statutory statement from the Councils Section 151 Officer on the robustness of this proposal is set out in **Appendix 1**.

The amended recommendations that support this alternative budget (for budget setting and determination calculations) are set out in **Appendix 2**.

Councillor Jefferson Horsley
Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

February 2013

Appendix 1

Alternative Budget Proposal – Statement by Section 151 Officer

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This appendix reviews the amendments set out in the Alternative Budget proposal and reports on the robustness of that proposal and the adequacy of reserves.

2. Robustness of Budget Estimates

2.1 The proposed alternative budget makes some amendments to spending priorities for 2013/14, but maintains the 0% tax rise position set out by the Executive in their final budget position shared on 6th February 2013.

2.2 I am happy that the figures used in the alternative budget proposal are robust and that the level of reserves remain adequate. There are no new financial risks associated with the new investment.

3. General Comments

3.1 All other general comments as set out in my report on the Executive's budget proposal stand.

4. Adequacy of Reserves

The Alternative Budget proposal does not make any significant changes to the level of General Fund Reserves. The use of £46,515 of reserves to balance the 13/14 budget is not significant, and should the new investment areas be for one or two years only, then there are no concerns to flag.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Based on the above review, and the comments in my report on the Executive's proposal, I am pleased to report that I believe the Council's reserves to be adequate and the 2013/14 Alternative Budget proposal is robust.

Shirlene Adam
Strategic Director

February 2013

Appendix 2

Recommendations – General Fund Budget Setting

Full Council is requested to consider this alternative budget proposal and, if supported, to approve the detailed recommendations on the General Fund Budget as set out in the Executives proposal with the following amendments:-

- a/ Note the s151 Officer Statement of Robustness in Appendix A of the Executives proposal and the further information in Appendix 1 of the Alternative Budget proposal.
- b/ No changes needed
- c/ No changes needed
- d/ Approve the Service Options in Appendix D of the Executive proposal, with the deletion of the proposal to save £4k on hanging baskets.
- e/ No changes needed
- f/ Note the expected General Reserves position of £3,032k (reduced by a further £46,515) and the medium term financial plan projection and the ongoing financial challenge to address the budget gap for future years.

Recommendations - Council Tax Setting

The Alternative Budget will make minor changes to the determination position which impacts on the recommendations in the tax setting report.

Full Council is requested to approve the detailed recommendations on the Council Tax Setting as set out in the Executive proposal with the following amendments:-

10.1 Appendix A to be approved with the following amendments:-

- 3. (a) £86,090,186 (*Gross expenditure including amount required for working balance*)
- 3. (b) £80,529,785 (*Gross income including reserves to be used to meet gross expenditure*)