

Budget Speech

22.2.2023

Dear Chairman, Members and Officers

The financial year of 2022/3 will be remembered first and foremost for the cost-of-living crisis that the country has faced. Like all individuals and institutions this Council has been impacted by the increased costs, which put pressure on the Council budget, and will also impact on future years. That has however not stopped the Council from continuing to deliver on the programme of work that I set out in my speech last year, and of which this Council, its Members and Officers can be rightly proud.

I set out in my speech at the beginning of this municipal year that 2022/3 would be a year of consolidation, building on the strategic priorities which had been embedded within our recently published Commercial Strategy, Climate Action Strategy and the emerging partnership of One Maldon District, developed with a view to bring together key partners across the District to address the strategic issues around health, economy and community safety and support that affect us all. I highlighted that the focus would be on health and wellbeing and quality of life, and building social value. We have also progressed the review of our Local Development Plan, approved a re-organisation of our Service Delivery Directorate to improve efficiency in the use of resources and to re-align our structure into a more cohesive operational approach. Have also updated our Corporate Plan, whilst this was brought forward it could be delivered so quickly because of the work officers had already done in building the evidence base ensuring we now have a Corporate Plan based on clear evidence, with clear priorities underpinned by clear guiding principles and a defined Golden Thread which will steer the Council over coming years and enable the budget challenges of future years to be addressed through a clear process of service planning to match resources to priorities. I will return to this theme as it is this evidence based, strategic prioritisation of outcomes and allocation of resources accordingly that will enable this Council to navigate the future successfully, not from unevidenced motions, rather than sound evidence.

The past year has seen the successful development and delivery of the One Maldon District Partnership. The partnership brings together key strategic Partners across the District, encompassing the public, private and voluntary sectors. The partnership has played a key role in the development of the Councils UK Shared Prosperity Fund programme and has been the focus for partnership working in addressing the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on Maldon District Residents. The One Maldon District Community Services guide has recently been featured by the Local Government Association as national best practice, alongside the innovative Storage Centre for Household Essentials, which was developed as a community resource. The Community guide provides key information and support on health and wellbeing, energy saving tips, financial support and community groups that can help residents across the District. The work of the Partnership is developing, and its emerging Plan includes priorities including, Health and wellbeing, focussing on obesity, mental health and addressing the suicide rate in the District. These issues as embedded in our Corporate Plan are vital to the overall wellbeing of our communities and it is through this partnership working, addressing the wider determinants of health such as Housing, economic opportunities, and community safety that we will address many of the issues and priorities within our Corporate Plan. Partnership working is enshrined in that document and One Maldon District is our primary partnership for the District.

We must also ensure that our services continue to be delivered effectively, and complement the wider initiatives and partnership working, this was so clearly demonstrated this year by the way in which the Council took a co-ordinated approach to the Cost-of-Living Crisis supporting the partnership actions above, with the effective management of cost-of-living grants and support to individuals through our Revenues and Benefits Team and the great work they do. It is this joined up thinking and working that will enable our services to have real impact and protect the quality of life of our residents. Of course, this is just one example

and across the board we have officers working hard to deliver services and support our residents. Whilst this is sometimes challenging I know our officers strive for excellent services and work hard whether that is in the office or remotely.

Council has also recently endorsed the Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment of the North Essex Association of Councils. This initiative will bring together the Councils across the North half of Essex to work more closely, look at potential for greater strategic alignment and co-ordination on the key challenges we face around, housing, climate, and economic growth. It will also explore, at pace the opportunities for shared services to increase the capacity and resilience of all the partner organisations.

The two partnership examples I have outlined, alongside the Service Delivery review and the development of the Corporate Plan show the work that has gone in by Officers and this political administration over the last year to ensure that the Council is building the capacity, partnerships, and processes to enable us to manage the ongoing pressures that the Council will face as costs continue to increase, but real resource is reduced. It is so important that we have in place these building blocks I have outlined as they will form the strong foundation on which we can build the future of Maldon District Council and protect and enhance the quality of life of our residents.

The Councils new Corporate Plan puts Quality of Life at the heart of everything we do as a Council. Our vision is to be a sustainable council, promoting growth and investment at every opportunity. To support our communities through excellent partnership working and to maintain and improve quality of life. The six priorities for the Council will be:

- Supporting our communities
- Enhancing and connecting our place
- Helping the economy to thrive
- Smarter finances
- A greener future
- Provide good quality services.

As well as setting out within the document how we will deliver each of these priorities, the whole plan is underpinned by our ways of working.

We are committed to running a local authority that puts residents first, is a great place to work, providing quality services whilst working in partnership to support communities. To deliver this plan, we will build on good practice and continue to:

- Focus on the needs of our residents
- Make best use of resources
- Adopt modern and efficient ways of working
- Be digitally efficient
- Deliver commercial projects and be commercially focused
- Strengthen our partnership working to benefit the district
- Strive to be modern and innovative
- Champion our Core Values as they set our culture and behaviours and support the welfare of our Staff and Councillors
- As a smaller local authority in the county, we will lobby for infrastructure and state our case
- Bid for funding
- Be more visible and promote the good work we do.

This Plan has been shared with all Members over the past two weeks and whilst its development was accelerated it is a clear, robust, and evidence-based document that sets out what we will do, how we will do it and how we will measure success and it also sets out the process through which we will allocate our resources. As such it will provide a blueprint for the ongoing success of the Council. Given its importance I am asking the Chairman of

the Council to move the approval of the plan up the agenda of this Council, to be heard immediately following the budget items.

So to the budget itself. This budget has been developed through a collegiate and inclusive approach, encompassing, officers and Members and utilising the Finance Working Group, Strategy and Resources Committee and all member budget briefings before being brought here today for approval of Council. As Leader I have ensured that the Finance Member Working Group has included representatives from across the Council, including, Conservatives, Independents, and those Members unaligned to groups. The approach taken has been to develop a balanced budget that protects services, whilst also seeking savings and efficiencies. Some of these savings include:

- Increased income from Council assets.
- Increased income from recycling.
- A reduction in staffing numbers where efficiencies have been realised.

The Council is also using its reserves to maintain vital services to the public in the face of the cost-of-living crises and allow a proper and strategic review of budgets next year. Investment in public assets is also included such as new play equipment.

The Council tax increase is well below inflation and equates to an additional 12p a week.

It is part of an overall strategy that the budget avoids rash service cuts and salami slicing of budgets. That old fashioned approach is counter-productive and has no place in sensible budget making and is unlikely to be in the public interest. This budget, alongside the structural changes agreed for the Service Delivery Directorate, protects services, and builds resilience. Of course we will have to make savings in future years, but for the coming year we have brought stability and resilience and put in place those strong foundations I referred to earlier that will enable the Council to review future models for delivery, and reap the benefits of partnership working, the introduction of shared services and overheads, maximise the potential for appropriately outsourced services and build a cohesive and efficient business model for the future, within the resources available.

To facilitate this approach this budget is underpinned by the appropriate use of reserves, which is fully justified in the current cost of living crisis, as it utilises reserves built up over recent years and which belong to the local community as well as the Council and which now protect services for residents in these hard-pressed times. We will of course use the processes and the plans set out already in this speech to ensure ongoing sustainability for the council in future years.

With these strong foundations in place the Council is well placed for the future

I referred earlier to the inclusive, encompassing work, through representation on the Finance Working Group of Conservatives, Independents and Unaligned. Likewise, the Strategy and Resources Committee. Now is not the time for individual political point scoring. This budget, this time, now provides us an opportunity to show how we can collaboratively and successfully as a Council in the most challenging of times deliver support and the best outcomes for the residents of the Maldon District.

I thank Cllr White the Chairman of Strategy and Resources Committee and Mr Leslie, Director of Resources, and his team for all their hard work throughout the budget process. Chairman I commend this budget to Council for approval.