

**Leader's Budget Speech – 16 February 2017**

Mr Chairman, Members of the Council, it is my responsibility and privilege as Leader of the Council to present the proposed budget for the year 2017 / 18, commencing on 1 April 2017.

The budget before us this evening is the result of a process that was started in the summer of 2016. In this time of national austerity and international change Officers and Members have worked hard together to achieve a balanced budget which would protect our front-line services from cuts whilst maintaining the quality of service our residents deserve. This budget, I can proudly say, has not come about by accident or good luck but rather by strong and disciplined financial management, hours of discussion and a close eye on our Districts priorities.

It is widely known that Local Government has been hit harder than virtually any other part of the public sector as a result of the austerity programme introduced by national government, in answer to the 2008 financial crisis.

The reality is that this Council's core funding from Central Government will have been reduced by 51% (£1.25m) in the period 2015 / 16 to 2019 / 20.

This is a sizeable sum for our district council to absorb year on year. But that is exactly what this Council has done through sound, disciplined and prudent financial management (whilst protecting and maintaining front-line services).

Even in this difficult financial environment, we have invested in our services and we continue to do so. Our capital programme in 2017 / 18 amounts to £950k, and includes key improvements to our assets. We have supplemented this by punching above our weight and successfully bidding for funds such as £300k from the Coastal Communities Fund for the Dengie Gateway Project for example. This has not only provided improved access to our coastline and the wider district but also funded the development of our new tourist website, benefits from which have already contributed to an increase of 140,000 day visitors as reported by the latest Visit Essex Volume and Value Survey. Many of our businesses rely on tourism and the total visitor spend in the Maldon District now equates to over £155m and adds £189m value to the local economy which is an increase of 3.5% on last year.

The Council also secured £50k from the Coastal Revival Fund with which we have commissioned a Historic Waterfront Review to compliment the Maldon and Heybridge Master Plan, due to go out to public consultation very soon.

In addition to enjoying this benefit now, these successes allow the Council to access and match other external funding to progress additional work which will ultimately lead to greater long term security and prosperity for local businesses as well as generally boosting the visitor economy.

We are also actively engaging and working with EDF Energy and Chinese partners CGN identify opportunities, ways to maximise the benefit from the development of a new nuclear power station at Bradwell in terms of local employment and procurement and in creating training opportunities for new worker entrants and up-skilling existing workers in our District.

This Council continues as always to seek to provide valued, cost effective services. Our new waste collection contract which commenced in the summer of 2016 has bedded in well and we have collected an additional 900 tonnes of recyclable waste to be diverted away from landfill. In the first six months of operation with our new partners Places for People our £2m investment in

the Blackwater and Dengie Hundred leisure centres we have seen an increase of usage and participation in physical activity of 13% overall.

As a Council, our Corporate Plan sets out how we will deliver our vision and goals for our District. Our business and resident communities are at the heart of the Plan, a plan that sets the basis upon which the allocation of our resources and supporting strategies and policies including this budget planning, stem from.

Last year, I set out the three significant priority areas that we should underpin at all times and these are:

- The people who live in the District and the visitors.
- The people who rely on the services we provide, in particular the vulnerable.
- Our staff and how we support them in their daily endeavours to provide good quality, cost effective and valued services with reducing resources.

As I said earlier the budget before us this evening is the result of months of hard work, careful planning, and discussion, occasional disagreements but always to work towards a solution to provide the best outcomes for the whole of the Maldon District.

Throughout the coming year 2017/18 the Council's finances will continue to come under severe pressure and our core grant will be reduced by 19% (£363k). Further reductions of 25% (£405k) by 2019 / 20 are expected. Overall the Council will suffer reductions of 52% (£1.262m) in the period 2015 / 16 to 2019 / 20. This is worse than the England average reduction of 32% and shire District average reduction of 44%.

This makes the job of managing the Council's finances more difficult each year by year and yet the Net Cost of Services is currently running £173k (1.9%) lower than in 2016 / 17.

The Government has recognised the financial pressures on District Council's and I have already explained the disproportionate cuts absorbed by District Councils to date. As a result the government is allowing us the flexibility to increase our Council Tax by £5.00 before a referendum is triggered. We are proposing to use this £5 increase our Band D council Tax which amounts to around nine pence per week in real terms. We are not proposing this increase lightly and I believe the Council Tax charge from this Council represents excellent value for money for the wide range of good, quality services we provide.

Our activity does not end there however. We will soon have a comprehensive Transformation vision and programme for the way we work and deliver our services underpinned by newly worked Workforce Development, Customers and Information and Communications Technology Strategies. This provides the wherewithal that allows the Council to achieve our Corporate Goals, delivering our Corporate Plan. More will be heard about this later in the meeting.

Going forward, the Council will continue to plan for savings of £1.04m before the end of the decade to close the gap between what our forecasts show is the level of resources we need to deliver the services we will have. Any additional projects will have to be funded over and above this and we do not intend to be complacent. It is our intention that the budget setting process will be starting early again next year and as your elected Members we continue to have a vital role to play in shaping our spending priorities, meeting our ambitions, retaining our Districts unique character to make the Maldon District a better place to live, work and enjoy for us and our families and for future generations.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to Councillor Sismey's leadership of the Finance committee for their role in this budget, together with both the previous Director of Resources and our current Interim Director of Resources Mr. Kamal Mehta who has shown remarkable resolve in getting to know this District, it's priorities and pressure points. Tonight, he is my favourite Honorary Maldonian. Together their advice and guidance in the ever complex and changing world of local government finance has been essential but freely given, thank you.

Chairman, I commend this budget to Council.