

**District Councillors Report to the
Annual Parish Assembly**

of

Sulhamstead Parish 6th. June 2019

Beenham Parish 17th. April 2019

Englefield Parish 22nd. May 2019

Thank you Chairman

This is my final Report to you as your Councillor on West
Berkshire Council.

Finance.

As last year and previous years I shall start off with the real issue for your Council - finance. Although the Council has, confusingly, a number of budgets, the one you may be interested in is the net revenue budget of £131 million which was set at the full Council meeting held on the 5th of March. This figure is made up of just under £98 million from Council Tax plus just under £24 million from retained business rates plus about £9 million from various Government grants

It included an increase to your Council Tax, as you know, of 2.99% - this raises approximately £2.8 million.

As always, the basic cost of running the Authority increases in simple terms each year by around 2% per annum due to contracted salary rises and inflation increases in supply contracts.

The usual Government grant to local authorities, called the Revenue Support Grant (the RSG) and which had existed for many years and which stood at over £40 million a few years ago, has now ceased to exist so the Authority has to exist financially on Council Tax plus retained business rates and a few small government grants ; perversely the Government had proposed the RSG should move into negative territory, that is, the Local Authorities would have been required to pay the Government – out of already severely stretched budgets! Thankfully this proposal has disappeared.

On the matter of Business Rates the Authority collects in about £87 million in business rates from business's in West Berkshire which is sent to the Treasury although the Council is allowed to keep, as I have said, just under £24 million, which is a critical contribution to our revenue budgets.

In passing, it might interest you to know that the amount of Housing Benefit that West Berkshire administers on behalf of the Government is £40 million.

The General reserve has been kept at just under £7 million, which is the figure we are advised is the minimum for an Authority of our size.

The Council develops what is called a Medium Term Financial Strategy which looks into the finances for the next couple of years; in projected balanced budgets there are proposed council tax increases in 2020/21 of 1.99% and a similar amount, 1.99% for 2021/22.

Now for other matters:-

Firstly - **SCHOOLS**

The Districts 83 schools provide a good education for around 26,000 pupils, the majority of whom live in West Berkshire – with 75 of our schools being judged good or outstanding by Ofsted.

Our secondary schools score in the top 25% at GCSE for the benchmark measure of ‘good pass’ for English and Maths combined and the top 25% for almost all the A level measures.

The performance of the Willink Secondary School in Burghfield

Common was again very strong in 2018, which was

recognised by the Dept. for Education with the school being

awarded ‘Teaching School Status’. A project to expand this

popular school is included within the Councils capital

programme.

Recent secondary school allocations show in excess of 90% of West Berkshire pupils have received their first choice of school.

Englefield, Beenham and Sulhamstead & Ufton Nervet Primary Schools also all returned strong results all within the top 25% or 50% in performance in key measures.

I am also pleased to be able to say that the project to create a lovely new Primary School at Theale (which continues to be rated Outstanding by Ofsted), has started on site and is due to be completed later this year.

Meeting the needs of children with special needs is a strength of the Authority with a positive inspection result in this area in 2018.

The Council is also committed to improving the education and school's estate and had a robust capital programme spending £9 million last year with a further £16 million planned for this year.

ADULT SOCIAL CARE

As in previous years the largest item of spend from our net

revenue budget is in respect of Adult Social Care – the number of recipients remains constant at about 2,000 individuals per year (our District population is about 165,000 people).

Over 50% of the Councils net budget is spent on ASC and the costs are always rising, the service is always under pressure and struggles to avoid an overspend every year. Now, thanks to the ring fenced extra 3% council tax rise last year and the year before the finances of the Adult Social Care service should balance out, but I have to say that the demographics of an ageing population and an increase in the number of clients, or their needs - some of which can be complicated and expensive - can affect the finances considerably.

A central plank of the Authority's policy continues to be enabling those people for whom the Authority has a responsibility to stay in their own homes where possible. This makes good sense for the individual and is also helpful in budget

terms.

PLANNING & HOUSING etc.

Once again this year, of all the contacts I receive from my electors by far the greater number are to do with Planning.

Hopefully, I have been helpful to those enquirers.

The Authority has a responsibility to deliver new housing, which is progressing well and at the moment there is a clear 5 years land supply programme, based on 665 dwellings per year.

This is an important statistic as it enables unwanted development across the District to be controlled by the Authority and not by Government Inspectors – although, again, some would say that Government Inspectors have interfered quite a lot in local affairs already.

Work on a new Local Plan to cover the period 2026 to 2036 has begun with a call-for-sites exercise progressing well.

It remains my view that the Government will require Local Authorities to increase the numbers of houses proposed for their

Districts into the future – as I said our requirement at the moment is 665 units per year. Watch this space.

The proposed “Garden Settlement” at Grazeley south of Reading seems to be making progress; it straddles land at the east of our District, land at the west of Wokingham District and some Reading land and has a possible projected total of around 15,000 houses - about 5,000 of those houses would be in West Berkshire. Clearly, one of the main issues will be the creation of appropriate infrastructure, or rather the cost of that infrastructure, and this will require Government financial input – a bid has been submitted to Government for £220 million to start the creation of the essential infrastructure to enable the area to be opened up for development.

Planning fees.

The matter of planning fees still continues to exercise me and although the Government agreed to an increase in the fees of 20% recently it is only progress so far because the fees should

have been increased by about 50% to cover the actual cost of running the department. So you, the Council Tax payers, are still subsidising people who make planning applications.

The new Minerals & Waste Local Plan is still steadily making its way through the Authority and is planned to come before the Council in September. The sites at Cowpond Piece and Firlands plus Gidney Beds adjacent to the Spring Inn on the A4 are likely to appear in the publication of the preferred proposed sites consultation document sometime this year and then out to general consultation and eventually in front of an Inspector – so you can see there is still a long way to go.

As always, the main concern is the quality of the transport access up to and into the sites, controlling disturbance to neighbours as much as possible and the quality of restoration at the end of the process, whether back filled or not.

HIGHWAYS

You will have heard me tell you in previous years that there are 800 miles of road to maintain across West Berkshire comprising of 60 miles of A class road, 50 miles of B road, 280 miles of C class road and finally, over 400 miles of unclassified roads. This last category is largely rural but also includes estate roads. There are also 570 bridges, retaining walls and similar across the District plus 550 miles of footways and cycle tracks and 12,839 street lights.

Looking after this considerable estate requires, of course, considerable expenditure and this year the proposal is to spend £34 million for maintenance and improvement of highways and public rights of way.

This sum is made up from Government grants and contributions from the Councils own capital programme.

WASTE SERVICES and COUNTRYSIDE

The waste contract with Veolia continues to work well across the District with household recycling levels consistently exceeding 50%.

Since last year the planning situation at our superb waste treatment site at Padworth has been upgraded and the site can now receive general household waste from residents and is open for a trial period as from April from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. daily. This improved facility has been generally well received by our residents.

And finally **PERSONAL COMMENTS**

The local elections were held on the 2nd. May this year and I did not stand. I have served 19 years as a District Councillor and, like everybody else, I am getting older, so I judged now is the right time to stand aside and let somebody else represent you. The new Council will consist of 43 Councillors – a reduction from 52.

My Ward, Sulhamstead, which covers the Parishes of Beenham Englefield and Sulhamstead disappears and Sulhamstead is to be partnered with Ufton Nervet, Englefield and Bradfield into a new Bradfield Ward. Beenham will become part of a newly arranged Aldermaston Ward.

This year I have been Chairman of the Governance & Ethics Committee and I also sat on the Eastern Area Planning Committee plus the District Planning Committee.

I was Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group for 5 years and Deputy Leader of the Authority for 3 years. I have held the post of Executive Member for all departments of the Council with the exception of Children and Young People and I have been Chairman of the Authority, a post which I thoroughly enjoyed, twice.

Over the years I have had many issues to deal with on behalf of many of my electors across my Ward;

I believe, in general, I have been able to help them – I have also made some friends.

Finally, I have say, once again, it has also been a privilege to

have represented the people of Beenham & Englefield &
Sulhamstead as their Councillor.

I shall certainly miss my involvement with the Council.

Thank you for listening to me.