

District Councillors Report to the

Annual Parish Assembly

of

Sulhamstead Parish

24th. March 2016

Beenham Parish

20th. April 2016

Englefield Parish

25th May 2016

Thank you Chairman

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

Finance.

The real issue for the Council this year going forward was the

setting of a budget.

As I have mentioned before, in round terms, our net budget is around £120 million made up of about £80 million from Council Tax and about £40 million from Government grants.

As an aside, of the Government grants, £17 million is what we are allowed to keep from the Business rates collected across the District although the total collected is £84 million; you can see therefore, that £67 million of our business rates is distributed by the Government to other parts of the country. According to a statement made by the Chancellor recently Local Authorities will be allowed to keep the business rates they collect but, I suspect, the devil will be in the detail of this announcement yet to emerge and it will not turn out to be what at first appears beneficial to Authorities such as ours.

Back to the budget.

The Authority was required, by statute, to produce a balanced

budget by March. We were told in November, and were expecting, a hefty reduction in the Government grant for this coming financial year, 2016/17, of around £10 million and a list of potential savings was prepared, which was put out to the District in a consultation - consultation No. 1.

However what actually happened was that just before Christmas last the Government made another, completely unexpected, announcement that the Authority's grant was to be reduced by £19 million.

This was quite a shock; however, another list of further savings was duly prepared for consultation - List 2, and at the moment the responses are still being considered. Understandably, some of the savings proposed have caused a considerable stir amongst the population of the District, particularly around Libraries and bus services.

All these issues still have to be resolved but it is clear that amongst many other services, libraries and the bus services will be severely hit.

(Our General Reserve remains unaffected at around £6 million.)

Now for a quick round-up of some of the matters for which the Authority is responsible.

Firstly

SCHOOLS

Within the District there are 83 schools of a whole variety: nursery, infant, junior, primary, secondary and special schools plus faith schools and Academies; both rural and urban, large and small, from a primary of 22 pupils to large secondary's of around 1700 students.

These schools provide education for around twenty five and a half thousand pupils, the majority of whom live in West Berkshire.

The Council continues to invest in the schools' estate, namely £2.4m on maintenance in 15/16 and a projected £1.8m in 16/17.

The total Education capital

programme is running at around £13.5m in both 15/16 and 16/17 including both large and small projects, from a £3.5m secondary school sixth form centre, to adding additional classrooms to accommodate growing pupil numbers and delivering new school kitchens to provide capacity for the national free infant school meals initiative.

On School Admissions – West Berkshire schools continue to be popular. For 2016 secondary allocations, (incidentally 88% of applications were made on-line), 98% of pupils were allocated one of their first three preferences, 92% of these being first preferences; one of the highest in the South East.

· Of the 2015 exam or assessment results:

- Foundation Stage (Early Years) and Key Stage One (Infant)

performance was in the top 25% nationally

- At Key Stage Two (Juniors) the percentage of children scoring Level 4 (expected achievement at age 11 yrs) or above was 82%, against a national average of 80%

- At Key Stage Four (16 year olds) West Berkshire's percentage

gaining five good GCSEs – 5A*-C incl. English and Maths was 62%, against a national average of 56%, putting us in the top 25%.

It is worth recording that NO West Berkshire schools have been judged to be inadequate by Ofsted.

I can also tell you that West Berkshire's Adult and Community Learning provision was inspected by Ofsted in Autumn 2015 and judged to be Good

So, overall a satisfactory state of affairs; however, the Education service is not complacent having recognized that improvement is needed in outcomes for disadvantaged groups and maths results.

ADULT SOCIAL CARE

Of the Council's Net Budget of just under £121 million, £41 million is budgeted in respect of Adult Social Care & Care Commissioning and Safeguarding (37% of the budget) plus an additional £3 million which is the expected expenditure in respect of the Care Act Eligibility changes.

The Adult Social Care Budget is spent on four main areas

namely :-

Memory & Cognition - c. £6 million

Adults with learning disabilities also c. £14 million

Adults with mental health disabilities - c. £2.5 million and

Adults with physical disabilities - c. £9 million

The remaining spend covers a wide range of services which includes amongst others Re-ablement, Carers, Access for All, the Voluntary Sector, Home and Resource Centre provision.

At any one time the number of individuals benefiting from these provisions, whilst variable on a year-on year basis, is around

1,800 - out of our District population of 165,000

An important objective of Adult Social Care's service is aimed towards 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.

On the 5th November last year the Council approved the Housing

Site Allocations DPD which sets out the location of specific development sites across the District, this means that the Authority now has a clear 5 years land supply (based on 665 dwellings per year) , as required by Government . This positive position came about too late for the Firlands application in Sulhamstead, on the edge of Burghfield Common, but is now in place to enable the Authority to control unwanted development across the District.

However, one caveat is that this Document has yet to be tested by an Inspector in June this year.

HIGHWAYS

As I remind you each year, there is a considerable amount of highway to look after in West Berkshire; around 800 miles (1200 kilometres) and maintaining and improving the roads costs significant sums in revenue and capital expenditure.

The headline point is probably the administrations pledge to resurface 145 miles of road over a 4 year period – 37 miles were resurfaced in 2015/16 so the project is on track.

All 3 categories of road, A, B and C showed an improvement following the 2015/16 annual survey. You will have noticed street lamps being replaced across the District. This is a large project covering 10,000 lamps, upgrading them with LED's as well as replacing 3,700 columns all at a total cost of around £7 million. The project will be completed in May this year and save the Authority around £300,000 in energy costs.

One of Highway's biggest challenges in 2016/17 will be coping with the revenue budget reductions. £500k is coming out of Highway maintenance plus £750k from public transport. Also, a great deal of work is going on behind the scenes to maintain a reasonable local bus network but regrettably some areas of the district will have a reduced service. Details will be announced once the public consultation responses have been fully assessed.

However, although the revenue budget continues to shrink,

there is a reasonably healthy capital programme, largely due to government grants. The 2015/16 programme was around £17m which enabled the Authority to not only resurface the roads mentioned above but to introduce many other schemes. These included 21 flood prevention and drainage projects. There is a similar sized programme in 2016/17.

WASTE SERVICES and COUNTRYSIDE

The waste service through the contract with Veolia appears to be working well across the District; the household recycling figure is in excess of 50% - a continuing great compliment to all householders across the District.

In Countryside the management and maintenance of our commons and wildlife centres which were taken over by BBOWT (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire wildlife trust) last year under a joint agreement also appear to be

working well.

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PERSONAL COMMENTS

Although I started the year as an Executive member I decided to come off the Executive in October. I had been on the 'front bench' of the Authority for 10 years and I felt it was time to move aside and involve myself in other activities. I am still serving on the Eastern Area Planning Committee and the District Planning Committee - in fact, Planning matters take up a great deal of my time as a Councillor.

Finally, I have say, once again, it has also been a privilege to represent the people of Beenham & Englefield & Sulhamstead as your Councillor.

As in previous years I have had many issues to deal with on behalf of many of my Constituents across my Ward;
I believe, in general, I have been able to help them.

Thank you for listening to me.