

Buckinghamshire Business Group

6 February 2024

Buckinghamshire Council
The Gateway
Gatehouse Road
Aylesbury
Bucks
HP19 8FF

For the attention of Mr David Skinner, Service Director of Finance

Dear Sirs

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Thank you for sharing Buckinghamshire Council's budget proposals for 2024/25-2026/27 and for providing an overview at the meeting of the Buckinghamshire Business Group (BBG) on 31 January 2024 into these. Further to the discussion at the meeting, and discussions separately for the private sector members, this letter represents the collective views of the business representative organisations and independent businesses that form the BBG.

As in previous years, the business community remains keen to work collaboratively with the Council to address specific opportunities and challenges, to provide innovative thinking where appropriate, and to act as a critical friend. More timely receipt of information/consultation documents etc will greatly assist this process and allow volunteer private sector members of the group to robustly consider and comment upon matters of import and policy.

The BBG members acknowledge the continued global political and economic challenges being faced, and the increasing financial pressures under which everyone, including Local Authorities, is operating, albeit inflationary pressures appear to be starting to ease slightly. We note the continued increase in demand for services, the Council's legal obligations to provide these, and the resultant impact on the Council's financial health, particularly when considered in light of the level of savings that need to be delivered over the term of the budget.

As outlined in our meeting on 31 January 2024, the BBG members have focussed their attention on the elements of the budget that directly impact economic development/growth under the Council's pillar of "Increasing Prosperity" as we consider this is where we can best offer comment and guidance. We would also appreciate receiving updates on progress against this pillar throughout the year so that we may offer support and advice, as appropriate.

You shared at the meeting that you received a little under 1,500 responses to the public consultation carried out. However, we note the very low return from the business community within this number. The feedback received from members of our various organisations was that questions in the consultation were phrased in such a way as to make it difficult to respond objectively, or to make the wider argument for investment in economic development and articulate the possible unintended consequences that may result from disinvestment, for example an increased liability on the State. It is felt that this narrative is lacking from the budget documents shared.

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The continued investment in capital projects to promote new development, provide much needed infrastructure, and provide support for the county's High Streets and town centres, is very much welcomed. We would ask for reassurance that strategies are aligned when allocating resources, for example, progressing a strategy around town centre regeneration whilst disinvesting in enforcement, accessibility provision, litter management etc, would seem counterintuitive. We note the requirement for robust business cases where the Council is borrowing to support capital projects and would caution that any borrowing is very carefully monitored.

As discussed at the meeting, we would encourage the Council to use the expertise available on the BBG to far greater extent when looking at what is needed to support growth in the county, including, but not limited to Local Plan/Infrastructure Statement development, and when the Council is seeking to bid for discrete 'pots' of funding that become available and when deploying those funds if successful. We stand willing; and would ask that we work together on a forward plan to ensure the BBG is able to provide input at the appropriate points to ensure opportunities are not missed and that scarce resource is used to best effect.

BBG members are keen that investment in economic growth and regeneration continues to be a priority for the Council and would note that reducing spend in this area could result in challenging consequences. Investing in the local economy helps create a stronger local tax base that benefits both local and central government. It improves the prosperity of Buckinghamshire residents through the creation of jobs and better employment opportunities. The provision of jobs is perceived by BBG members to be a critical need if dependence on the state is to be reduced.

In conclusion, mindful of the significant financial pressures being brought to bear on the Council, BBG members are supportive of the budget presented. As last year, we would ask that you continue to build on your dialogue with us so we might continue to bring our insights, knowledge and expertise to support the Council's work where appropriate, providing a conduit for a two-way dialogue with members of our business representative organisations.

As mentioned at the meeting, BBG members feel very strongly that economic development should be considered a statutory duty for Local Authorities, and we will be raising this for discussion through the policy units we access.

Yours faithfully

Elizabeth Adlington

Elizabeth Adlington
Chairman
On behalf of Buckinghamshire Business Group

cc: Rachael Shimmin, Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire Council