

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BUSINESS GROUP

Western House
14 Rickfords Hill
Aylesbury
Bucks
HP20 2RX

13th February 2001

Dear Mr Williams

STATEMENT BY THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BUSINESS GROUP AFTER CONSULTATION WITH BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL ON THE 2001/02 BUDGET

The Buckinghamshire Business Group, which represents business interests across the County, met the Vice-Chairman, the Leader and other senior members and officers of the County Council for the annual statutory meeting on 5 February 2001.

The main purpose of the meeting was for the Council to present its emerging budget to the Business Group and for the Group to ask any questions before formulating this response.

Firstly we would like to thank the Council for the submitted report and the lucid presentation by the Leader of the Council.

We noted the policy steers that underpinned the formulation of the budget and the extensive consultation that the Council had undertaken, both on the budget and the strategic aims and supporting policies which are being developed for the new Council in May.

From our perspective the Revenue Support Grant settlement appears to have been more favourable than in recent years, particularly because of the allowance for Area Cost Adjustment. The Group has supported the Council in the past on its representations on this matter and is willing to do so in the future if the need arises.

On Education, we understand the policy of passporting onto Education Service Provision the additional resources made by the Government. The use of additional resources to raise achievement by all pupils is a policy we would support wholeheartedly. The pupils of today are the workforce of tomorrow.

The Group shared your concerns on Social Services, in particular that the spending pressures are significantly outstripping the resources available.

It was noted that in certain areas of Service Provision, expenditure was significantly above the Government's Standard Spending Assessment for the County, which it appeared was set at an unrealistically low level bearing in mind the needs of the population. You outlined the various strategies you were proposing to tackle this difficult subject, including lobbying Government for more resources, critically examining the costs of care packages and reviewing policies. The Group would be pleased to offer its support for lobbying on this subject.

As you know from previous meetings, the highway network is an important issue for our members. You explained that, by using borrowing approvals available, you were proposing to spend an additional £3.75m on improving the condition of the network. This is welcome but I think we both recognise that considerable investment is needed over the medium term, and the BBG fervently hopes that this improvement can be maintained.

Apart from these major areas of spend, you outlined some of the other priorities for the Council budget. We discussed two of these in more detail, recruitment and retention and economic development. We recognise the pressures you have in recruiting and retaining staff, particularly in those areas nearer to London. This is something that we also face and we were interested in some of the ideas you were considering, eg links to colleges and bursaries. The additional £100,000 you are proposing for economic development work is strongly supported by the Group and we would be keen to work with you on how it can be best utilised. In passing, can we repeat our thanks to the Council for its support in establishing the Bucks Economic Partnership.

The Group supports the Council's drive to achieve efficiency savings and you updated us on the root and branch review programme and how it has been subsumed into the Government's Best Value agenda.

You also set out the main features of your proposed capital programme, which, through increased borrowing and the generation of capital receipts for reinvestment, will be larger than in recent years. Again, the highway network was the focus of the discussion and the Deputy Leader kindly updated us on A418, including Stoke Hammond / Linslade West Bypass, Wing Bypass and the Oxford Road Bridge.

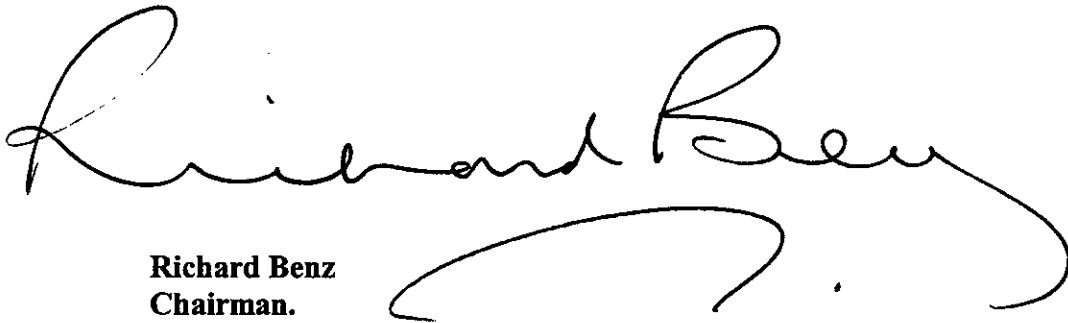
In relation to the proposed council tax increase of 5.4%, we noted that it was a lower increase than in recent years. However, it is still twice the rate of inflation and a cost falling on our employees, adding to pressures on pay levels. You explained how the increase was consistent with the Government's assumptions and at or below the likely average for other counties in the South East. Whilst appreciating the efforts that have been made, resulting in an increase that is one of the lowest in the Country for Shire Counties, we can only hope that in future years the reduction in the rate of increase will

continue and that in the not too distant future increases will be at, or below, the rate of inflation.

We suggested that it would be helpful to have a second meeting in the autumn when the budget was at an earlier stage. You were receptive and perhaps we can follow this up at an appropriate time.

In conclusion, can we thank you for your time and hospitality. We welcome the opportunity to discuss matters with you as we have a shared agenda in maintaining and enhancing the economy of Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely,

A large, fluid handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard Benz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Richard Benz
Chairman.

Chris M Williams, Esq;
Chief Officer,
Buckinghamshire County Council,
County Hall,
Aylesbury,
Bucks.

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