

Buckinghamshire Business Group

Mr Richard Ambrose
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Buckinghamshire Council
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Dear Richard

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Thank you for providing an update at the recent Buckinghamshire Business Group meeting on Buckinghamshire Council's proposed budget for the year 2021/22, and the four year capital plans in place.

As agreed at the meeting, I am writing to provide formally the response from the business representative organisations and independent businesses that form the Buckinghamshire Business Group (BBG).

It is acknowledged we are living through challenging times and the draft budget was prepared in advance of the third national lockdown; the impact of which is, as yet, unknown on the local economy. BBG members recognise that, against such a backdrop, estimating income and expenditure in the coming year will be fraught with uncertainty and that funding streams from government may change, subject to the course of the pandemic.

That said, we note the balanced budget presented, acknowledging this does not reflect the impact and lost income that might arise from the latest lockdown, and that council tax budgets have again been set at 3.99%, after adopting the flexibility to defer a further 1% adult social care precept until 2022/23.

We note, with sadness, the anticipated increase in the number of people making use of council tax reduction schemes and hardship funds as a result of the pandemic and increasing unemployment figures. This highlights the continuing need to help people retrain/upskill and, recognising that this work is largely carried out through the Buckinghamshire Skills Hub, BBG members suggest it is important that appropriate funding continues to be allocated to support this work. In turn, the business community will continue to try and identify future skills gaps so appropriate training provision might be put in place.

While being innovative and flexible in its response to the constraints caused by the pandemic, the business community has very much appreciated Central Government financial support during the crisis, and the support Buckinghamshire Council has provided through the use of discretionary funds. We note some funding has been announced for 2021/22 in relation to Covid-19 to both support the local economy and to help offset some lost income to the council; income necessary in order to provide statutory services.

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BBG members are pleased to see continued investment in necessary capital projects and infrastructure, to the benefit of the local economy, noting that these large economic development projects will be subject to review, having previously been under the control of District Councils, which may result in reprofiling spend.

Recognising the budgetary pressures being brought about through lost/reduced income (car parking, leisure centres, New Homes Bonus withdrawal, council tax receipts, Energy from Waste income, etc), the BBG appreciate the Council's moves to make operational savings wherever possible, reflecting that homeworking arrangements have made significant savings in the current year and that these working practices will likely reflect 'the new normal' for the Council.

As discussed last year, one of the arguments in the case for the Unitary Authority was founded upon budget savings and efficiencies through the reduction of elected officials. Recognising local elections have been delayed as a result of Covid-19, the BBG would ask that the Authority continues to work towards delivering upon these efficiencies and anticipated savings.

Further to discussion at the BBG meeting, we are very pleased to hear of the likely allocation of £11.9m from the Future High Street Fund for regeneration and development of High Wycombe town centre; this will offer much needed support for the High Street in one of our key towns. Looking to a future post-pandemic, we would like to be involved in further discussions around how to revitalise High Streets and town centres generally and how to support the night time economy across the county.

So, in conclusion, BBG members are supportive of the budget presented. We would ask that you continue your dialogue with us in the coming year so we might fully understand the impact of changed funding streams in response to the current health crisis, and how these might impact the Buckinghamshire business community.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Adlington

Elizabeth Adlington
Chairman
Buckinghamshire Business Group

cc: Rachael Shimmin, Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire Council