

Buckinghamshire Business Group

Mr Richard Ambrose
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Buckinghamshire Council
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1 February 2022

Dear Richard

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Thank you for providing an update at the recent Buckinghamshire Business Group (BBG) meeting on Buckinghamshire Council's proposed budget for the three year period 2022-2025, 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 BBG. However, the BBG business members would firstly like to offer our sincere thanks to Buckinghamshire Council for the work done in maintaining the level of services provided to businesses and residents, alike, during the last very difficult few years.

It is recognised there are still challenges to be faced resulting from Covid-19, in addition to uncertainty around future funding regimes, tackling climate change and addressing changes in social care provision. The business community is very keen to work with the council to address specific challenges, eg around climate change, and provide innovative thinking where this is appropriate. We are also keen to see the council taking a leadership role in working with partners to ensure an integrated approach to change and development.

BBG members acknowledge the 3-year balanced budget presented has been set against the backdrop of a 1-year financial settlement from Government, and that the budget assumptions beyond this period bring with them an element of risk around future funding, not to mention significantly increasing inflation and interest rate pressures. You outlined a number of the measures being taken to mitigate for these pressures but, nonetheless, we recognise the risks remain.

With regards to income, BBG members note that council tax has again been set at 3.99%, utilising the additional 1% adult social care precept deferred from 2021/22, and that council tax for 2023/24 and 2024/25 is to be set at 2.99%. We also note the budget assumes continued recovery in the local economy and, therefore, in the council's income streams such as business rates, parking, leisure receipts, etc, offset by increased costs to meet demand pressures, particularly in adult and children's social care and in home to school transport.

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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; budgeted investment totalling over £200m in the coming year.

Recognising the budgetary pressures, we encourage the Council to continue moves to make cost savings wherever possible, including in reviewing contracts, looking at staffing levels, weighing the benefits of outsourcing versus in house provision, seeking to support people in their own homes for longer, and driving efficiencies. You explained the use of funds in the corporate contingency budget line to address extreme demand pressures in high risk areas, but we consider the allocation of these should be identified in the final budget outcome for relevant years.

We are pleased to see the number of Councillors will be greatly reduced from 2025, as per the outcome of the Boundary Commission Review, achieving significant savings to be put to public services.

BBG members suggested there may be work for Buckinghamshire Council to do in developing a more effective communications strategy, both with businesses and with residents, sharing good news stories, such as Buckinghamshire being the highest achieving county for the roll out of electric vehicle charging points, but also in preparing those in the county for changes to come and sharing the rationale for these.

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 can offer assistance (where appropriate), act as a critical friend, and so that we might fully understand the implications of future funding and social care regime changes 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