

Buckinghamshire Business Group

Mr David Skinner
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Buckinghamshire Council
The Gateway
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HP19 8FF

10 February 2023

Dear Dave

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Thank you for providing an update at the recent meeting, chaired by Philippa Batting, with available Buckinghamshire Business Group (BBG) private sector representatives, on Buckinghamshire Council's proposed revenue budget for 2023/24 and the four year capital plans in place. Philippa, as BBG Vice Chair, has subsequently shared with me the outcome of these discussions and this letter represents the collective views of BBG members present.

Without the benefit of seeing a balance sheet, but as agreed with the representatives present at the meeting, I am writing to provide formally the response from the business representative organisations and independent businesses that form the BBG. As last year, the business community remains keen to work with the council to address specific challenges and provide innovative thinking where this is appropriate.

BBG members recognise the challenges faced by Buckinghamshire Council in developing the budgets presented due to a mixture of factors including global political and economic turmoil, continued uncertainty around funding regimes/policy, and increased demand for services both in terms of sheer numbers, but also in terms of the complexity of need seen. We acknowledge the material risks to the council that arise as a result of this.

The significant changes made in council finances in order to maintain and protect front line services, as well as supporting residents and businesses through the current difficult economic times, and in the light of increased costs being seen, including £33.3m in unavoidable growth pressures and £30m inflation on the cost of service delivery, are acknowledged.

BBG members note the proposed increases to both council tax (4.99%) and business rates levels, which, combined, form the bulk of the funding received by the Local Authority. BBG members also note that, despite the severe economic pressures being experienced currently by residents and businesses alike, the council still anticipates council tax collection rates of 98.3% in the coming year.

It is pleasing to see good income being generated through the Energy From Waste plant, albeit this is being tempered by the introduction of the electricity generator levy.

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With regards to Climate Change and Environment budgets, you committed to sharing the detail around income/expenditure for EV charging points. You also indicated you would check with colleagues as to the drivers for increased primary school places noted in the capital budget.

BBG members are pleased to see continued investment through the capital programme (c£500m over the next 4 years) including, particularly, support for town centre regeneration in Aylesbury and High Wycombe (with additional funding being available should strong business cases for investment be brought forward in other town/village centres in the county) and continued investment in the county's road infrastructure.

With regards to demand costs, BBG members commend the work undertaken by the council to achieve "fair cost of care", whilst also seeking to maximise purchasing power on third party payments through the mix of block contract and spot provision arrangements, and ensuring a sustainable good level of care for those requiring it, in line with current procurement processes. BBG members recognise the added complication being seen as the NHS seeks to discharge patients from hospital as promptly as possible back into community care. We commend the Council's process of benchmarking supplier and partner costs against market information available to you.

BBG members note the use of council reserves to support the proposed revenue budget, but also that remaining reserves outlined in the budget documents (c£45m) are within the recommended range for a Local Authority the size of Buckinghamshire Council. We would caution against continued use of reserves to support revenue budgets.

BBG members are pleased to note the council remains on track to deliver savings anticipated by moving to a unitary authority, over the timeframe outlined in the original business case, and would be keen to see this progress to plan.

We note the increase in audit fees this year (£450k) due to national regulatory changes that have impacted on the audit regime and amounts payable to auditors; this is not unique to Buckinghamshire.

Finally, with Buckinghamshire's strength in the Creative Industries, the establishment of the Buckinghamshire Film Office is warmly welcomed. We look forward to receiving the promised information on the level of income seen by the Film Office in the last year and the detail around projections within the budgets in the Culture, Sport and Leisure portfolio.

Whilst recognising it is still early days, BBG members would encourage the development of more ambitious plans and targets for the Buckinghamshire Film Office in order to drive income generation. We would expect to see, and would welcome, opportunities for greater integration with the Tourism sector businesses and would look to BBF and Visit Bucks to play a role in brokering strategic relationships to support accelerated growth of opportunities in the county.

We would like to offer our thanks to you and your team, Dave, for the work carried out to produce the budget and for your time in providing the briefing and answering our questions on 7 February 2023.

That said, it was disappointing that papers were not made available in a timely manner to allow for full discussion face to face at the meeting planned for 2 February 2023. Members of the BBG are committed to offering robust and constructive feedback as part of this annual process. To do so, they offer their time and insight in a voluntary capacity because of their commitment to a collaborative working relationship in support of business and economic growth across the county.

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In conclusion, BBG members are supportive of the budget presented. We would ask that you continue to build on your dialogue with the BBG, which is valued by the members, in what will be another challenging year, so we can continue to bring a wide ranging business perspective to your programmes of work and so we might fully understand the implications of future funding and social care regime changes and how these might impact or create opportunities for the Buckinghamshire business community.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Adlington

Elizabeth Adlington
Chairman
Buckinghamshire Business Group

cc: Rachael Shimmin, Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire Council