

HUNGERFORD TOWN COUNCIL

29 FEBRUARY 2016

Formal response to the WBC Phase 2 Budget proposals

ISSUE

Hungerford Town Council [HTC] acknowledges that following the draconian cut in Central Government Grant, West Berks Council [WBC] are required to find huge savings over and above those identified in Phase 1 Budget proposals.

HTC applauds the decision to seek public opinion through a Consultation process but regrets that such little time is available and decisions are to be taken before the end of the Consultation period. However it notes that subject to Delegated Authority being given to the Executive Committee, amendments to certain issues can be made at their meeting scheduled for 24 March 2016.

At that meeting, this Committee should be mindful of the key policy priorities in the WBC Strategy for 2015=2019;-

- **Better Education for Communities**
- **A stronger Local Economy**
- **To protect and support those who need it**
- **To maintain a high quality of life within our Communities**

Furthermore a major policy embedded in this Strategy was the formation of **Rural Service Centres** that deliver results under the above aims and **Hungerford was so designated by WBC.**

Therefore if our Children's Centre and library are closed and our rural bus services axed, HTC will no longer be able to fulfil this role.

RECOMMENDATION

1] VOTE IN FAVOUR of the proposal to delegate authority to the Executive Committee to allow amendments to be made on specific Phase 2 Budget proposals in the light of the results of the feedback to the Consultation.

2] That the following issues must be flagged up for such further consideration at that meeting of the Executive Committee on 24 March:-

- * Closure of Children's Centres
- * Axing rural bus services
- * Closure of Libraries

3] VOTE IN FAVOUR of the proposal to increase the borrowing limit by £11m in 2016/17 and a further £4m in 2017/18.

BACKGROUND

WBC will be aware from the Consultation feedback from Phase 1 Budget proposals that the above three issues were far and away the main concern of respondents. Accordingly HTC wish to outline some of the key features and concerns relating to those facilities in our environment.

HUNGERFORD CHILDREN'S CENTRE

With a budget of only £108K pa, this centre, working in tandem with the adjacent OFSTED star Nursery School, serves over 1,000 individuals over an area of 160sq. miles.

Whilst primarily caring for children [0 – 5 years] with special needs, it plays a major role in promoting **family wellbeing** in a largely rural community where isolation, depression and mental issues are significantly greater than in the urban locality of Newbury.

The experience and professional expertise that has been developed over 8 years by the Hungerford Children's Centre team, augmented by dedicated volunteers, has delivered a confidence in the service and advice that would be hard, if not impossible to achieve if transferred to Newbury.

It should be noted that part of the service offered by this Centre is that of Parental Training and has been recognised as a role model for such service providers and accords firmly with **a key WBC policy priority, namely**

"To protect and support those who need it".

The Centre is currently exploring avenues to reduce costs but should be eligible for some of the funds generated by the 2% Levy within the WBC Council Tax that has been ring fenced for Adult social care.

RURAL BUS SERVICES

The problems associated with isolation in the rural areas of West Berks, manifest themselves in the symptoms of depression etc. witnessed and treated by the staff of the Hungerford Children's Centre.

To many residents in those rural areas, the bus service is their only means of accessing the services of surgeries, dentists, shops and libraries and is their lifeline to the greater Berkshire community. To reduce the rural bus service will only exacerbate the problems identified. WBC are taking away the use of Bus Passes for any Handibus runs and this will cause problems for vulnerable and needy people who rely on the Handibus to take them to the shops, etc. CHAIN will lose a possible £3,500 from Bus Passes and this is on top of CHAIN taking over the Handibus from WBC at the end of the year, with all the additional expenses of running the bus.

Nevertheless, as cost savings have to be found, an urgent complete review of the provision of an effective and cost efficient transport system should be undertaken. The commercial bus services might be carried out by fewer buses operating more routes over alternate days.

Whatever financial solution is found, **HTC recognises that a reduced service is better than no service** if another of the WBC key policy priorities is to be achieved; -

- **"Maintain a high quality of life within our Communities"**

And these communities must include those that are spread across the rural areas of West Berks.

HUNGERFORD LIBRARY

The provision of a '**comprehensive**' library service remains a Statutory Obligation on WBC and the closing of 8 out of 9 libraries across West Berks will raise the spectre of a costly legal fight for WBC.

The library in Hungerford, newly built only 9 years ago, serves a widely spread population and has developed into far more than a book lending facility. With activities such as:-

- Craft and chat circle
- Rhyme and time for children
- Book reading groups
- Half term activities for the young
- I.T. training
- Access to the Newbury Job Centre in Newbury via the internet for job applications and/or associated benefit
- And more in the planning stage

The Hungerford Library has become a Community Hub

Currently the library does not open on Mondays or Thursday but still attracts more than 600 visitors each week. A considerable number of these also shop in town and as such add to the footfall which is important if Hungerford is to help WBC achieve its stated policy priority of:-

"A stronger local economy"

Closure of the Library would have a severe negative impact upon the residents of Hungerford and our environs but HTC wishes to explore an alternative option for our library to maintain another of WBC's key policy priorities of:-

"Better Educated Community"

HTC will work with WBC officials to seek cost reductions. However without a full financial analysis of the present costs, it is unable to see clearly how this might be achieved. From the limited data currently released by WBC and some considered estimates, HTC believes the running costs of our library are circa £65K pa .which seems to include a cost of £17K in Rates to WBC?

WBC also receives Rates income of over £5K from HTC from our office and Public Toilets which are now fully funded by HTC at a cost of some £18Kpa.

Some of the routes that might achieve a more cost efficient means of maintaining our Library that might be explored are:-

- Further reduction in opening hours
- Increased volunteer help under the supervision of professional Librarians
- Financial contributions from HTC; Town & Manor or other external sponsors
- A parking supplement on the Church Street car park directed to Library funds
- Formation of a Community Interest Company
- Long term Lease to HTC at Peppercorn rent
- A dedicated new Charity

CONCLUSION

HTC wishes to join with WBC and all other Towns and Parishes in West Berks in sending the strongest message to Central Government that the size of the Grant is disproportional, unworkable and even with the so called Transition payment of £1.4m will produce a massive negative impact upon all residents. Furthermore the transfer of the promised Business Rates income should be brought forward to allow Local Authorities to function under their long term Planned Strategies.

HTC and WBC will work together to provide the vital services required to meet the high priority aims under their published Strategy at lower costs and within a reduced Budget perhaps supported by an increased level of borrowing. However HTC along with all other Parish/Town Councils affected, is deeply concerned that irrevocable decisions will be made before a mutually agreed solution can be implemented. Perhaps if the increased borrowing limit is agreed, such funds could be used to bridge this potential timing mismatch?

Yours sincerely,

Martin Crane

Cllr Martin Crane OBE

Mayor; Hungerford Town Council