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Subject: An update from Martin Tett, Leader of Buckinghamshire Council

Sent datetime: 2022-01-07T17:08:37



News from Buckinghamshire Council

7 January 2022

Dear Resident,

I'd like to start by wishing you a very Happy New Year. I know that Christmas has been hard for many people this year and plans have been disrupted for those who've had to isolate and who have been ill with Covid. I do hope that most of you have still be able to enjoy something of a more 'normal' festive season than we all endured last year.



The new year is always a good opportunity to look forward. I know we all face a lot of uncertainty, but life goes on, as does planning for the future. As a Council, and like others across the country, we are busy setting our budgets for 2022/23 and I'd like to start by letting you know more about what we're proposing.

This week, the Council's Cabinet approved our budget and spending plans for 2022/23. It goes without saying that we're operating in a very challenging environment; Covid has created extra demand on our services and a huge amount of uncertainty, at a time when councils up and down the country are already facing major financial pressures. That said, I am very proud that we are a strong and financially prudent Council and we are in a much better position than many other local authorities. It means that we're able to propose continued spending on the areas that matter most to our residents. The budget has taken into account the feedback we received from residents during our budget consultation and I'm pleased that in 2022/23 we can budget to:

- Continue investing more than £100 million in a comprehensive programme of road and pavement improvements.

- Spend nearly £120 million overall on strategic highways improvements over the next four years, including flood prevention and street lighting.
- Again next year, clean out every one of the 85,000 gullies in the county to prevent flooding and to improve the local environment.
- Fight Climate Change on a number of fronts including planting half a million new trees in Bucks – one for every resident.
- Hopefully open another of our local Household Recycling Centres which are so popular with residents.
- Add to the funds available for rolling our high-speed broadband into additional areas.
- Deliver on our commitment to greater efficiency from the new council with another £42m of service efficiencies and selective income increases.

For me, it's essential that we have a budget that proposes spending money on what matters most to residents – we are spending this money – your money – on your behalf. It does mean we've had to make some difficult choices to balance the books and allocate money to these projects however. We are choosing to dip into our General Fund (unallocated) Reserves to use £1.36 million on a one-off basis, as we would rather use these funds than cut frontline services. We have to raise Council Tax again this year to cover our overall costs and to pay for essential frontline services. We will therefore be proposing a general increase of 1.99% to cover inflation (currently around 5%). Alongside that we will implement the Government's proposal for a 2% increase solely to cover the large increase in social care costs. Social care alone is projected to cost us nearly £300 million in 2022/23. In total this means we are proposing an overall rise in Council Tax of 3.99% - which equates to a rise of £1.23 per week for the average Band D home.

I really do know how much pressure households are under with the rising costs of living and we don't take these decisions lightly. There is no wriggle room in council budgets, especially if we want to spend money in areas like roads improvements which residents have asked us to prioritise and which we know is crucial here in Bucks with the level of traffic and vastly increased numbers of HGV movements due to HS2 and East West Rail construction.

Give us your feedback on these spending plans

The next stage of the budget process is called 'scrutiny' – it starts next week and allows residents to actively take part and give feedback on the budget proposals. You can view the full budget plans [here](#) and please look at the topics being discussed at each 'scrutiny select committee' session next week [on our online calendar here](#) – you can also watch the sessions live online as they happen.

If you want to submit a question for any of these sessions please email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk by **9am on the day of the relevant session** and the Chair will put them to the Cabinet Member during the session.

Covid update

Infection rates of Covid in Buckinghamshire are the highest they have been at any point in the pandemic, as is the case across the whole country. The current wave is being driven by the highly infectious Omicron variant. As we know, Omicron does appear to cause less severe illness but the pressures created by the sheer number of cases cannot be understated. Our NHS services locally are under significant strain caused as much by staff absence as by patient numbers and our local ambulance service is currently being supported by the army to keep being able to respond to emergencies appropriately.

One particular concern here in Bucks is a rise in cases amongst older age groups (60+ years) and whether that will lead to more people becoming more seriously ill with Omicron given the risk from Covid is higher the older you are.

Overall, as ever, our individual actions and choices will all play a part in the collective fight. As individuals, we can still all do our bit to protect ourselves and others – overall aiming to reduce the impact of Omicron where possible to help get us through this very difficult winter period.

- Keep testing, immediately before and after meeting others.
- Try to meet outdoors and keep inside areas ventilated. I know we're going through a cold snap at the moment but opening windows for just 5 minutes each hour will help refresh the air.
- Get vaccinated – it's safe and it offers the best possible protection against the virus, especially once you've had your booster. There is lots of local capacity and it's really easy to book and go along – a fantastic army of volunteers is staffing our vaccine centres and there are plenty of health experts on site to answer any questions you've got. **Book via the [NHS National Booking System](#)**. This includes pregnant women – if you're pregnant or trying to conceive and have questions about the vaccine then experts at the vaccine centres can explain the facts.

You will also probably be aware that the rules around how long to isolate following a positive test have changed – if you test negative with a lateral flow device on days 6 and 7 (where day 1 is the day after symptoms start, or the day after you took a positive test if you had no symptoms) you can end your isolation period on day 7. Please familiarise yourself with all the [latest advice on the Government's website](#), which includes limiting close contact with people outside your household until day 10 if you are able to end isolation early.

Up to date local Covid data is on our website at the [Covid dashboard](#).

Welcome back schools

I just want to say a few words to welcome back all students, teachers and support staff across all of our schools, doing a sterling job during this challenging time. I want to thank all school staff for the efforts they're going to managing the extra pressures and logistics being caused by Covid. Again, everyone is going the extra mile to keep lessons and learning going in the face of rising staff absences and all the extra measures and testing. Thank you to secondary school students too for wearing your face coverings for long spells in the classroom. We are closely monitoring the situation around staffing and case numbers in schools and are closely supporting all schools in the county.

Other news

I just want to finish by highlighting a few other bits of local news and info. Firstly, something a bit different but of real importance here in Buckinghamshire. It's a key aim here to preserve the natural beauty and environment wherever we can – never more important given the heart-breaking devastation HS2 is wreaking across our county. We want to be sure to use previously developed sites for new development wherever possible, rather than building on so-called 'greenfield' sites. To that effect, we want people to help us identify any suitable sites for future development on so-called "brownfield" land in Buckinghamshire. Find out how to do this [on our website](#).

And to end on an upbeat note: I'm thrilled to report that the annual children's Christmas present appeal has again had a fantastic response. This year, with the Council's support, it was co-ordinated and run by a newly-formed charity 'Inspire Bucks'. Thanks to the generosity of the people of Buckinghamshire and the hard work of the small team of volunteers, more than 2,000 local vulnerable children got a high quality Christmas gift this year when they otherwise may not have had anything for Christmas. That's 700 more children who received presents via the appeal this year than last year. Thank you all so much for your generosity and do find out more about the [campaign on their website](#).

I again wish you all the best for 2022 and hope you stay safe and stay well in these challenging weeks to come.

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* Phone lines are open Monday to Thursday 9am-5:30pm, Friday 9am-5pm. Phone lines are closed on bank holidays.

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