

County Councillor Report 2023/24 – Newent Town Council APM

Budget for 2023/24

Proposals put forward by the Conservative majority administration for a budget of 616 million were passed in February. This represents a £42m increase in the budget compared to 23/24. For a band D property, this means a monthly increase of £6.34. The increase is above the expected rate of inflation for this year. It is made up of 2.99% increase on council tax and a 2% precept for adult social care.

Amendments by all three opposition parties were accepted. These included the following from my Liberal Democrat Group:

£25,000 – Public Rights of Way

Increasing the resource available for mapping so people know which walking routes are available to them.

£25,000 – Flood schemes

In a year with huge amounts of flooding across the County, the group felt it was important to support communities that suffered from the flooding that occurred.

£82,500 – Freezing the cost of on-street parking

With the cost of living continuing to bite, we ensured residents who have to pay to park outside their own house were protected from another cost increase.

£100,000 – Additional money for Road Safety

Liberal Democrats are committed to reducing the amount of deaths that take place on the county's roads. Gloucestershire has one of the highest KSI rates in the country.

£20,000 – To work up the governance arrangements and criteria for a scheme to allow foster carers who are willing, to make improvements to their home to take extra children

This is a Liberal Democrat idea to provide more space for foster carers to take care of more children. The Policy, could save the county £millions in the future if it means fewer children being put into out-of-county placements.

Motions to Full Council

In recent meetings we have tabled motions, of which amended versions were passed after the Conservative administration removed criticisms of the government. Topics included:

- Shortening waiting lists for cancer care and the NHS
- Holding the Conservative Government to account to keep their promise of restoring policing to 2010 levels (we are still a long way off this in police per person terms)
- Cost of Living Crisis
- Declaring a roads emergency

Local Bus Transport

The County Council has had a bid for £6 million accepted to introduce more electric busses in the county. It is unclear if this means more bus routes for Gloucestershire.

The Council has agreed a bus improvement plan worth £4.4m meaning some services are now more regular.

This means the trend of recent years seeing cuts to bus services is finally starting to slow. This is thanks to local groups supporting existing bus services. Services like the Robin (a bookable bus that links with existing bus routes) have been a success and are showing a blueprint for supporting rural services in the future. Liberal Democrats are strong believers in public transit, and a Liberal Democrat administration will make public transport a priority.

In the county we are now at 80% + of the level of pre-Covid bus journeys

Road Safety Policy

Liberal Democrats are committed to the County Councils vision for reducing the amount of road accidents taking place across the county. The Council now has a pot of over £2m to tackle road safety. The Liberal Democrats have put forward budget amendments to increase these in the past 2 years.

Going forward, the aim will be to spend this money wisely and reduce the high casualty rates we currently see on Rural A roads.

Highways

The Newent TRO double yellow line scheme is almost complete. Court Lane was omitted in error but will be included. The length of time taken to complete the scheme is not unusual but the TRO team has been strengthened to avoid unnecessary delays.

Some investigation has taken place into the feasibility of providing a pavement in places where there is none in Culver St. The relevant officer has been promoted and I am planning to meet with their replacement asap.

The previous reporting portal for Highways defects has been replaced with a national website – Fix-My-Street. It is expected to give more customer feedback than the previous channel.

This is part of the Highways 'Transformation exercise' which is apparently including repairs of pothole clusters, a state of the art spray injection patcher and new materials for repairs. Unprecedented wet weather has exacerbated damage and hampered repairs but the continued lack of government funding to local councils, has meant that in truth, there is a mountain to climb before our highways and pavements are all fit for purpose.

Highways Local Fund

Each year, every county cllr has a budget of £30K to spend on small safety projects within their division. The Newent division covers ten parishes. Bids for 2024/25 funding are welcome.

Build Back Better – Councillor Scheme

This fund, which covers the four year term of office for each county councillor, and originally stood at £40K and was increased by £10K for supporting community projects, is almost spent. Two linked, but annual funding pots of £3K for youth funding have also been

provided. For the community, The Newent Cricket Club has been successful in applying for funding recently, to provide more facilities for young players. Another tranche of funding for youth services has been agreed, again for £3K pa. The first award was made to Newent Initiative Trust to support The Chill Out, after no other successful bids were received.

Environment

On-street EV chargers have been installed all over the county and Newent has four. Funding at present is only for these chargers which are 7Kw and intended largely for residential use.

Fast fibre broadband rollout for areas of very poor reception is still supported by a Household Digital Grant Scheme through Fastershire, but that scheme is coming to an end after a temporary extension.

Food wastage has been the subject of a leaflet received by all households I believe. It is shocking to learn that 25% of all residual waste is food. All districts in the county now collect food waste at the kerbside and this is taken to the AD facility in Bishops's Cleeve where it provides energy and fertiliser rather than being taken to Javelin Park where its high water content does not make good fuel for the EfW incinerator.

The Rural Estates Working Group of which I was a member has now reported to Cabinet. Recommendations for the future of the GCC-owned farms centred on retaining the estate and not selling valuable farms (which are intended for start-up tenancies) for development where alternative acreage could not be found. An investigation into the potential for a solar farm in a suitable GCC-owned location is also being explored.

Council Meetings

I have attended all Full Council meetings and have submitted questions on a number of topics. I have also attended all the committee meetings of which I am a member. These are Planning, Constitution and Environment Scrutiny Committees. I have also continued in my role as Environment spokesperson for my group.

Please feel free to contact me about these or any other matters.

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