

Councillor Stewart Palmen, Leader of Trowbridge Town Council gave the following speech to the Council on Tuesday 19th January 2021, prior to the Council approving the budget and Council Tax precept for 2021/2022.

I'm pleased to present the proposed budget for 2021/22. It is a responsible budget, recognising the Covid climate we are in, but also proving the ability for this council to be ambitious for the Town and focus on the town's needs now and into the future.

If we momentarily reflect, this time last year, when setting the budget; we had not heard of Covid, furlough or a new meaning for the word shielding; yet we set a budget that has been able to withstand the unforeseen, a budget criticised at the time. That budget has proved to be a good, responsible decision that has allowed us to ride the Covid financial storm.

It allowed this Council to rise to the challenge of Covid and support this community. Staff were redeployed to the front-line, helping the vulnerable and the isolated. I must pay a big Trowbridge thank you to the people who work for the Council for their commitment, flexibility and support; you were great.

Because Trowbridge Town Council is well run, and here I thank officers for their management of the budget, we were able to maintain sound financial management, with adequate cash flow and still deliver the strategic plans for this year.

The refurbished Trowbridge Museum project with over £1.37M of external grant funding, is on schedule to open as soon as restrictions are lifted. And I will also pause here and thank the Officers and volunteers for their unstinting efforts to successfully conclude these ambitious plans during this difficult year.

The Refurbished museum has been part of the ambitious town development plan, drawn-up by us. Over the last 20 years we have transformed a moribund do-nothing Council into an effective force for change in the town. With a long-term business plan that has delivered a revitalised People's Town Park and a refurbished Civic Centre that the Town can be proud of. A Park with refurbished hard courts with lighting for extended evening use, well maintained play equipment for children, pleasant and well-maintained open areas for people and families to enjoy and a large space for community events. The foresight for long-term investment has proved its worth during the Covid pandemic and the Council has done this and still maintained the Town precept to local residents well below many other towns in the area.

How has this ambitious plan been achieved? By leadership that has confidence in our Town, that wants to make Trowbridge better, by good financial management and investing in long term projects that have had the ability to encourage further external investment. Remembering here that an important factor in the development of the Cinema complex was the Town's investment in the Civic Centre.

But we need to do more, this Town deserves even better.

Wiltshire Council has failed in its responsibilities to provide improved leisure facilities and cleaner streets. We want to fill this gap. We are fed-up with the prevarication by Wiltshire Council. We must act. We have invested in a street sweeping machine and a cleaning hit squad to deal with littered and neglected areas. But we want to do more to improve our Town and residential areas and are ready and willing to negotiate with Wiltshire Council to take on more. We know that the residents are not satisfied with the minimal efforts of Wiltshire Council and want the town council to get things done.

As we hopefully move into a post Covid world we know the negative impact lock-downs have had on people's mental health. We want to support people to become active again. We will use our Active Trowbridge team to work in partnership with schools and in our community, providing opportunities for sports and recreation. We want to invest in refurbished hard play areas in Studley, Longfield, Seymour and Paxcroft and have secured over £100K of external grant money, to provide better play facilities and opportunities. Trowbridge field sports have been blighted over decades with poor facilities, waterlogged pitches on muddy clay surfaces. We want to change this, we want first class facilities at Doric Park that will provide all the year-round field sports facilities. This will be achieved with no cost to residents, bring in over £800,000 in external grants to our community and provide additional opportunities for sport and recreation so sadly lacking in the County Town.

We can do this by identifying over £50,000 of savings this coming year, by a modest rise of less than 5 pence per week in the Council Tax Band D rates, by attracting over £1 million of external funding into the town and good financial management. We want to set aside a budget of £20,000 to give to charities in the town who will be recovering from Covid, to support those isolated and in need. We want to open the refurbished museum on Saturdays and Sundays when Covid restrictions allow, we want a better Trowbridge.

This ambitious programme will support the Town to participate in the exciting proposals to revamp the Town Centre. The Government grant of £16.3 from the Future High Streets Fund will allow a detailed plan for the town's redevelopment to be drawn-up. We are determined to play our part, we want to see a new swimming pool and sports facilities in the town, a re-vitalised market area offering places for people to shop, be entertained and meet. We already have a solid vision for a better Trowbridge.

I therefore recommend this budget to the Council; it recognises the stress in our community and the need to deliver a better future. It is affordable and ambitious, providing the resources to allow our Council to respond quickly to anything life may throw at us, whilst having clear achievable projects to make our Town better!