

Meeting: Council

Date: 11 September 2024

From: Councillor McLean

To: Councillor Wright, Executive Member for Adults and Public Health:

Question:

The new Labour Government having taken the winter fuel allowance away from many elderly residents, what steps will the Council be taking to make sure those effected are kept warm this winter?

Response:

I thank Councillor McLean for his question.

We know the changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance, will be a worry for many in our community.

Bracknell Forest has a strong track record of working to support residents facing financial hardship and our Financial Inclusion team secured over £100,000 in additional income for residents in the last financial year. This included contacting more than 200 pension age residents, who we believed may have been eligible for Pension Credit. More than 50 of these households proceeded with an application which resulted in an award of Pension Credit, which will, in turn, mean they do qualify for the Winter Fuel Allowance in 2024.

Funded by the Household Support Fund, the team are sending information for £100 of supermarket vouchers to over 600 pension age households who receive Housing Benefit and/or Council tax support from Bracknell Forest, identified as likely to lose their Winter Fuel Allowance. 490 of the recipients, we believe would be eligible for Pension Credit, so we have highlighted this to them in their letters and will be able to support as needed.

We have also been running a pension credit take up campaign with items included in Forest Views Extra, Town and Country, and the Leaders column in the Bracknell news, as well as on our social media, in recent weeks. Flyers and posters have also been ordered, to be distributed to libraries and GP surgeries amongst others.

The announcement of Household Support Fund 6, made 2 September 2024, is very welcome and the Welfare team will now prepare plans to deliver this support, to our most vulnerable residents over the coming Winter.

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From: Councillor Harrison

To: Councillor Jefferies, Executive Member for Culture, Delivery and Public Protection

Question:

Following yet another occurrence of waste being fly-tipped in Wellers' Lane in Warfield, will the Executive Member responsible please update the Council on how many new CCTV installations to deter this crime have been made since Council last passed a resolution on fly-tipping?

Response:

I thank Councillor Harrison for his question.

This area has seen incidences of fly-tipping for some time albeit without any pattern of behaviour. It is strongly suspected that these are repeat offenders operating at a variety of locations, one of which includes Weller's Lane. Wellers Lane is geographically challenging, and is ordinarily without any fixed CCTV, making it an attractive area for illegal fly tipping of waste. The PPP are responsible for investigating incidents of fly-tipping as set out under Section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Cleaner Safer Neighbourhood Act Of 2005. In response to four reported fly tip incidents, six mobile cameras were deployed in July 2024 along the Lane at sites most likely to provide any additional evidence that would support a wider investigation.

Following this deployment, no incidents of fly tipping were reported in a four week period. However, a further fly tipping incident in August is under investigation with other evidence recovered from the waste which originates from Staines, Middlesex.

The service has also secured a new mobile CCTV unit which will be deployed in areas considered to be 'hot-spot' areas for this type of activity.

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From: Councillor Allen

To: Councillor Neil, Executive Member for Finance & Corporate Improvement:

Question:

In the 2023/2024 financial year, Bracknell Forest Council posted an overspend of £1.225M – the only overspend the Council has ever had. How much additional funding does the Council need from central government to balance our books for this year and for the following two years?

Response:

I thank Councillor Allen for his question.

Bracknell Forest's core spending power reduced by 8% in real terms between 2010 and 2014. At the same time costs have increased each year through a combination of rising demand from a growing and ageing population and to fulfil the additional responsibilities placed on local councils by Central Government. Our position mirrors that faced by all local authorities and it is no real surprise that 7 councils have issued section 114 notices since 2020 and a further 20 councils received exceptional financial support in this year alone.

Bracknell Forest Council doesn't face a financial crisis on this scale, but it is becoming more difficult every year to balance the books. Councillor Allen is correct in stating that Bracknell Forest faced its first ever overspend in the 2023/24 financial year. This was financed by drawing from our general reserves. We did not request any extra Government funding for this. We face a similar challenge this year as we did last year. We are focused with our officer team on responding to that locally. Despite the funding crisis affecting our sector, it is not realistic to expect that the new Government will make available extra money this year to help out.

Looking to the future, we don't know what our future funding settlements will be. Our planning assumption until we have more concrete information is that we will receive a similar finance settlement in 2025/26 as we received in the current year. This increase in resources, primarily from council tax, would broadly match our expected inflationary cost increases. Any additional service pressures will need to be met by a combination of savings, use of reserves and potentially additional Government grant. This has always been the case.

Based on recent years, we can expect to face pressures, largely from rising demand for social care services, of around £5m each year. We have a statutory duty to set a balanced budget every year, regardless of what level of Government funding is available and that is what we are focusing on. In doing so, we will always look to protect services that our most vulnerable residents depend on.

The single biggest threat to our financial position at this time is the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit. We simply cannot continue to spend at the levels we are doing on SEND services. This Council agreed to join the Safety Valve programme because it secured extra Government grant to help our position. We all know that Safety Valve is a sticking plaster being used to cover up a broken system. All Education authorities are hoping that a solution to fix this permanently will be found soon.

I look forward to having further discussions and debates with fellow Councillors and local people as the actual 2025/26 budget proposals are brought forward for consideration later in the Autumn.

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Date: 11 September 2024

From: Councillor McLean

To: Councillor Temperton, Leader and Executive Member for Council Strategy and Climate Change:

Question:

We understand that a decision has been made to re-name the Executive as the Cabinet. How much will this cost our residents?

Response:

I'd like to thank Cllr McLean for his question.

I believe changing the name of the Executive to the Cabinet will provide clarity and consistency in our governance structure without imposing a significant financial burden.

Since none of the materials that feature the term 'Executive' are pre-printed, there won't be any need for expensive reprinting or redesigns. The primary costs will be minimal, involving officer time to update the agenda templates and a brief moment for Cabinet members to update their email signatures.