

## **Borough Council Lib Dem Group Report**

**21 November 2023**

We started 2023 working under the leadership of Mayor Dave Hodgson, making decisions to protect and enhance services for local residents – particularly during this cost of living crisis.

In February we had the very sad news of the death of Councillor Patrick Solomon who is much missed by us.

In Mayor Dave Hodgson's budget that was set for 2023/4, our key headlines were:

- Core Council Tax rose by just 0.9% as well as a 2% rise for the government's Adult Social Care precept. In total 2.9% - well below inflation and below the maximum allowed by government.
- Key services that residents rely on were protected yet again, despite severe Conservative government cuts.
- Council charges to residents, such as car park charges, were frozen to help residents with the cost of living crisis.
- A range of initiatives were included that will help the Council reach its carbon neutral target by 2030.
- Huge capital investments were made in the Borough's future including 2 new schools and 40 new classrooms, roads and pavement spending, play area refurbishment and town centre renewal.

This Budget built on our record of one of the lowest percentage Council Tax rises of all unitary councils and ensured no libraries or Children's Centres have been closed since Dave Hodgson was elected Mayor.

We set this Budget whilst continuing to tackle the £90 million of debt that was left for us when the Conservatives ran the County Council. This year we made even more progress with debt falling to £60 million. Maintaining a manageable level of debt means we spent less on debt repayments and more on helping residents, repairing roads and tackling climate change.

At the end of 2022/23 reserves were in a very strong position to protect services, having been strengthened by £21m since taking office.

Following the elections in May, the new Conservative Mayor has appointed a Cabinet of only Conservative Councillors, so the group has engaged in its new role as an opposition group – speaking up for residents' concerns and holding the administration to account.

The group officers are:

Leader – Henry Vann  
Deputy Leader – Michael Headley  
Whip – Tim Caswell  
Chair – Christine McHugh  
Media Co-ordinator – Tim Caswell  
Group Training Officer – Dean Crofts  
Diversity Officer – Sue Abood

Representatives to the Local Party Executive – Michael Headley and Billy Thompson  
Focus Fund Administrators – David Sawyer and Michael Headley

Committee Members (first name is group spokesperson) are:

Adult Services OSC – Tim Caswell and Wendy Rider  
Budget and Corporate Services OSC – Michael Headley and Christine McHugh  
Children’s Services OSC – Max Royden and Leigh Coombs  
Environment and Sustainable Communities OSC – Charlie Royden and Jon Abbott  
Health OSC – Dean Crofts and Sue Abood  
Audit – David Sawyer and Billy Thompson  
Standards – David Sawyer and Billy Thompson  
General Purposes – Henry Vann and Charlie Royden  
Licensing – Christine McHugh and Leigh Coombs  
Planning – Jon Abbott, Max Royden and Wendy Rider  
Pension Fund – David Sawyer  
Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Dean Crofts

Wendy Rider was appointed speaker at the Council Annual Meeting.

We have been challenging the Conservative administration on a number of fronts, including:

\* Axing the River Festival

We have proposed a successful resolution at Full Council to protect the future of the River Festival.

\* Secrecy around RAAC in schools and other buildings

We have repeatedly questioned them on this and at last they have started to publish some information.

\* Forecast Overspend

We have been highlighting their loss of control of Council Spending. With a forecast multi-million pound overspend in the current year. This is after the £30m extra we added into the budget when we set it back in February.

\* Reckless Spending Spree

We have been critical of their plan to add £53m extra borrowing to fund a reckless spending spree. Every £1 borrowed will have to be paid back with interest and borrowing this much will cost £5m a year – which will either mean higher taxes or deeper cuts.

\* Free School Meal Holiday Vouchers

We have called for an increase in the value of the shopping vouchers, given the increase in food prices. They have said they won’t do this.

We have also had success on:

\* Campaign to support new GP Surgeries

Following our pressure and successful council proposal, the council has now committed to providing up-front funding for new surgeries. There is still a long way to go to see this come to fruition and we will keep up the pressure.

\* Campaign objecting to Ticket Office Closures

We discovered that neither the Council nor the Mayor had submitted an objection to the consultation within the deadline, as we had done. However, the good news is that the government has u-turned on this.

Michael Headley

17/11/23