

### Borough Budget 2009/10

On 19 February the Borough Council approved its budget for the new financial year requiring an increase in council tax of 4.79%.

Wokingham is rated as one of the most efficient unitary authorities in the country yet is the worst funded unitary per head of population. We receive from central government just £124 per person compared with Reading at £381 and Slough £468. For 2009/10 we will receive an additional £285,000; to keep pace with inflation we would require around £1.9m.

Our top priorities in setting this budget are the elderly and children's services. An additional £1.28m is being invested in social care for adults bringing the total to £38m and an extra £1.2m in children's services (excluding schools) to £28m, £12m of which is to safeguard children.

We have made £16m of savings and efficiencies in the past 5 years; however, there is now very little, if any, fat left in the organisation.

It has been a tough review requiring some difficult decisions to cut back in some areas in order to protect front line care services. This year's budget did not include an increase in charges for our off street car parks – a contentious local subject. It is intended to initiate a 2 year charging cycle whereby we review charges every year but we only increase charges every other year.

### Reading Borough Council Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) Bid

You will be aware from my Parish Council Highway Update in November that Reading Borough Council (RBC) is currently working up a bid of some £300m under the government's TIF scheme. Items currently included in the bid are:

£30m to fund a reduction in bus fares

£18m to enhance inter-urban bus and coach services

£40m capital programme to include junction improvements to the IDR and 20 hybrid buses

£140m on a bus based Mass Rapid Transit system (Phileas)

£21m on rail improvements to include capacity upgrades

£35m on a third Thames crossing linking into the A3290 scheduled for 2018

Department of Transport (DfT) TIF guidance stipulates that authorities must introduce some form of demand management, preferably congestion charging to qualify for funding. You may be aware that the Manchester TIF bid was rejected last year when residents voted against congestion charging. The Independent Transport Commission (ITC), in strongly endorsing a new Thames crossing, stated that tolling the crossing offers the opportunity to use the price mechanism to influence usage. They believed that Reading and Caversham bridges could also be tolled and possibly Sonning and Henley as well. I consider that charging would be required in order to influence demand and I would hope that such charging would meet the DfT's criteria for demand management.

This bid is a very significant investment package that would bring considerable benefits not just to Reading but to **all** adjoining communities. Reading has been liaising with West Berkshire, Wokingham and South Oxfordshire Councils and I would hope that a cross boundary steering group, as recommended in the ITC report, will be established in the very near future. As partners they would all have the opportunity to influence the scheme which has the potential to bring significant transport benefits to residents in all the authorities' areas, reduce congestion and create a sustainable transport system.

Pat Baxter, Transport Strategy Manager, RBC has agreed to attend the Sonning Annual Parish meeting on 13 May to update us on the progress - details on page 1 of the parish newsletter.

### Strategic Transport Initiatives

We are all well aware of the increasing road congestion in the area. The M4 is often at capacity and one incident throws traffic onto the Borough's roads. We have the ridiculous situation of no direct rail link to Heathrow causing the bulk of Thames Valley business users to use the roads,

notably the M4. Sir Rod Eddington recommended that we should focus on improving the performance of the congested national and city networks and improve access to international gateways in order to best support the national economy.

**M4 Motorway.** The trial on the M42 of hard shoulder running (HSR) is considered by the government to be a success. As a result, the Highways Agency (HA) is considering HSR between West London and Newbury. However, it is not that simple as much of the road between the M25 and J11 has no hard shoulder, so, HSR would require expensive bridge widening. Management schemes to improve traffic flow, including variable speed limits, are being implemented. However, there is a concern that the use of traffic lights to control access onto the motorway may cause congestion on those access roads. The £62.5m J11 improvement scheme is under way and when complete will relieve congestion to the south of Reading.

The obvious answer is investment in effective and efficient public transport solutions to persuade people out of their cars, without which, the situation will continue to deteriorate.

**Rail.** The Secretary of State for Transport, Geof Hoon stated recently in parliament that “a Heathrow International interchange station in West London between a new rail line, Crossrail and existing Great Western main line services could provide convenient access to Heathrow.....There is also the potential to construct a spur into Heathrow or to route a new line via the airport. An early priority will be to consider these options for serving the airport.....” The Crossrail project, which requires electrification, currently terminates at Maidenhead. The line from London to Reading and beyond is one of the few main lines in the country that is not electrified. To access Heathrow terminals, lines must be electrified. It is incredibly short sighted to spend £16b on Crossrail and £550m on the Reading rail hub improvements and not extend the electrification to Reading and beyond. The government now appears to have taken this on board and I understand that a decision will be made this year.

## **Wokingham Borough Core Strategy – Examination in Public**

As I reported previously, the Borough Council considered that 320 houses a year under the 20 year plan to 2026 was the maximum sustainable figure. The government has dictated a figure of 623 that is 12,460 houses! Having a core strategy will enable us to build the bulk of those houses in sustainable locations with the infrastructure to support them. It will give some defence to unpopular back garden development which puts more and more pressure on the local infrastructure. To accommodate this level of housing the council agreed four Strategic Development Locations, within its core strategy, which will accommodate 10,000 of the 12,460 houses:

North Wokingham 1,500, South Wokingham 2,500, Arborfield Garrison 3,500 and Shinfield/Spencers Wood/Three Mile Cross 2,500

Arborfield Cross, Barkham Hill, Charvil, Hurst, Risely, Sindlesham, Sonning and Swallowfield have been identified as areas for only small scale additions particularly small scale proposals meeting local needs. Like it or loathe it Sonning is not immune from some development; however, approval of the core strategy will help to limit development in the Sonning area.

The Examination in Public on the Core Strategy will begin on 17 March in front of a government planning inspector. Members of the public and the press may attend. The hearing starts at 10am at the Professional Development Centre, Reading Road, Wokingham (previously known as the Old School House). The sessions are scheduled to continue until 23 April and different issues will be discussed on the different days of the hearing. Publication of the inspector’s report is expected in June.

The debate on the soundness of the core strategy document will influence development in the Borough for the next twenty years and beyond. Subjects to be discussed include homes, schools, roads, parks, shops, leisure facilities and employment opportunities (including a science park).

You can view the various documents relating to the hearing, including the timetable and list of issues at:

<http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/environment/planning/ldf/core-strategy/examination-corestrategy>

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