

Stratford on Avon District Councillor's Monthly Report for January 2024

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Budgeting for a brighter future

How much residents will have to pay for district council services from April 2024, what they will get for their money and how much Stratford District Council can afford are three questions that loom large at this time of the new year.

We've been working on next year's budget for some months now, trying to get a quart into a pint pot. We've been matching the services residents currently receive with the likely money available, while thinking about our manifesto commitments as the new Liberal Democrat administration.

All this against a cost-of-living crisis and high inflation that are still making life difficult for everybody. Inflation for the council means not only higher costs and delivery charges, but also increased demands for services in these difficult times. All have an impact on our budget.

The good news, however, is that we think we can maintain services and even improve them next year without breaking the bank. We hope to make some positive announcements soon, launching new initiatives over next few months. Residents and local businesses will also soon get the chance to have their say.

Meanwhile, however, we have been trying to second-guess what central government is prepared to let us have in terms of funding. This year's provisional settlement finally came through just a few days before Christmas.

Unfortunately, we only know what we'll have for the next financial year. For the sixth year running, it was only a 12-month settlement, rather than a multi-year commitment that would allow us to plan much better for the future.

Over the past decade, the money that central government gives to local authorities has fallen. This has partly been offset by increases in council tax and business rates, but overall there has still been a large cut. According to the National Audit Office, local government 'spending power' in England has fallen by over a quarter since 2010.

It must also be stressed that the lion's share of council tax money collected by the district council goes to Warwickshire County Council. Less than a tenth remains at Stratford Council. Last year, more than three-quarters – 76.6% – was forwarded to the county, while the district council kept just 7.4%. The police were given another 12.8%, and town and parish councils got the remaining 3.2%.

The district council nevertheless provides many services with the money it receives. 'Statutory' services, controlled by law, include waste collection, planning, housing, environmental health and licensing. Planning, for example, is a highly controlled service. Even the fees paid for major

planning applications are set nationally and currently do not cover the true cost of processing which is borne by local taxpayers.

Some services – known as ‘discretionary’ – are for the council to decide. These provide more opportunity to make a difference for residents. They include leisure facilities and economic development, which is essential for ensuring a robust local economy.

More details about our proposed budget for the next financial year from April 2024 will be unveiled over the next few weeks and opened up for public consultation. I urge you to make your views known. I welcome comments from residents and local businesses alike.